CHANGE AGENTS

Blueprints for Interinstitutional Collaborations in Social Design

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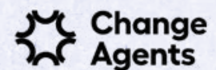

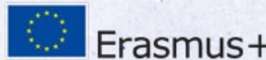

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Change Agents - Blueprints for
Inter-Institutional Collaborations in Social Design

Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design Budapest

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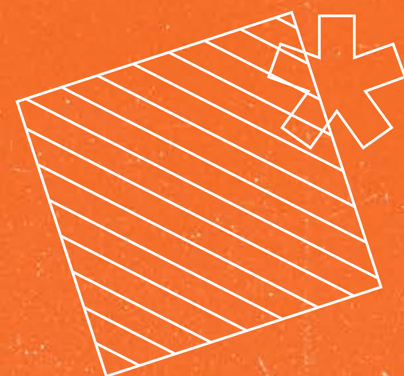

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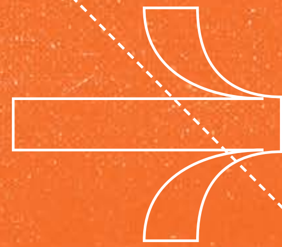
Introduction

by Bori Fehér



This book was created as part of the Change Agents — Blueprints for Interinstitutional Collaborations project, whose objective is to bring the design-focused academic sector and the NGO ecosystem closer together to cultivate a deeper understanding between these important stakeholders. In this way, the project contributes to the advancement of a more collaborative, inclusive, and participatory practice of design, while recognizing the already existing expertise of the participants. The project is centred around the idea that achieving these objectives will foster inclusivity in the field of design by engaging various agents and sectors with direct ties to different communities. These stakeholders are experienced in ethnographic fieldwork and can offer knowledge that is often not available to higher educational frameworks. By combining a focused social design literature review with experience-based methodological recommendations on cooperation in social design, the book can potentially raise awareness on how the design field — starting from design education — can address the real needs of communities to increase its social impact. This document was also created to help train future change makers who are dedicated to using their own practices to stimulate societal change. The authors developed this book with the purpose of supporting higher quality in academic, community-based design projects, as well as helping potential change makers propose new educational approaches in the long run.

The knowledge shared in this book aims to assist relevant stakeholders in establishing qualitative approaches for participatory collaborations between the higher educational sector and NGOs using tools of social design and related fields as organising principles. Furthermore, this book can serve as a resource for training change agents — leaders of future interinstitutional projects that contribute to social impact and inclusion in a wider sense — so they can create a ripple effect in their respective environments and build methodological bridges between NGOs and the academic sector in the field of design.

Who is this book for, and how should it be used?

This document was created for those potential change agents who tirelessly and enthusiastically work in the field of higher education specialising in social design and related fields. The secondary target group includes students as well as communities and community organisations working collaboratively with academia.

Another priority of this book is to contribute to the building of a more inclusive higher educational system. Structured collaborations, recommendations, and hands-on blueprints could strengthen academia's social impact by galvanizing education to take on fieldwork-oriented challenges. This book aims to propose new educational settings as it focuses on how to establish qualitative approaches for participatory collaborations.

The Blueprint provides scenarios and different paths through examples, and identifies directions and matrices to initiate and maintain interinstitutional collaboration. It also acknowledges limitations and concerns, and focuses on the key ethical aspects to consider when planning and implementing community-led social design projects. The book includes a literature review that establishes a theoretical framework, offers methodological recommendations grounded in relevant best practices, and presents results from the consortium's hands-on experiences, along with case studies specifically developed for this project. The Blueprint contains infographics, data visualisation, impact assessment tools, and even user-friendly templates to aid adaptation.

This book was not intended to provide explicit answers or solutions, and is not a 'how to' guide. The authors' aim was to share knowledge and recommendations based on prior studies and experiences aiming to foster a more collaborative, inclusive, and participatory practice of design, while recognizing the already existing knowledge of activists and everyday change makers. The authors are mostly educators currently working in European higher education institutions. While the literature review is comprehensive, it inevitably has its limitations and may not include some sources that other scholars might have considered. The case studies presented focus on Germany and Italy, offering valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities of interinstitutional collaborations. Although the findings aim to have broad applicability, certain obstacles may arise when adapting them to different contexts and localities. The authors incorporated the expertise of external specialists, including nine from the EU and ten from the U.S., Japan, and South America, further enriching the perspectives presented.

Methods of the project

The research methodology employed a mixed approach, combining literature review with empirical research and theoretical analysis to explore the interdisciplinary and complex nature of social design projects. The literature review began with a hybrid approach. First we gathered sources from project members via an online survey, then expanded this list by searching online platforms and using relevant keywords. After an initial review, over 50 sources were curated and the snowball technique was applied to identify additional relevant documents.

After the literature review, 19 semi-structured, one-hour interviews were conducted with participants from both European and non-European countries, including designers, academics, activists, and NGO representatives. These interviewees, selected for their diverse professional backgrounds and cultural contexts, shared insights into participatory design projects across 12 countries. After the interviews, the data was manually coded using a colour-coding system to identify themes and patterns. In vivo coding was applied to preserve the participants' own words. The synthesis of the literature review and the analysis of the interviews shaped the structure of both pilot projects.

The pilot projects were realised in Bolzano, Italy (conducted by the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano) and Berlin, Germany (conducted by the Berlin University of the Arts). The pilots involved design university students, professors, and researchers as well as active local NGOs (OfficineVispa in Bolzano and the Democratic Society in Berlin). The progress of both pilot projects was constantly documented and monitored through internal and external activities such as peer-to-peer interviews, observation, and keeping project diaries, as well as through retrospective workshops, public events, and presentations.

Based partly on the preliminary research and partly on the case study analysis of the pilot projects, several patterns could be identified in the context of overlapping challenges, needs, and motivations. These patterns served as the foundation for the methodological recommendations of the Blueprint.

Structure of the book

Divided into two parts, the book begins with an in-depth critical analysis of the current knowledge gaps, challenges, and practical opportunities, based on a review of the literature and an analysis of case studies.

Part 1 explores the theoretical, historical, and methodological aspects of NGO–academia collaborations. It identifies key challenges and benefits, presenting case studies from Germany and Italy that highlight real-world examples of collaboration, including the motivations, challenges, and outcomes of these partnerships. This section also explores future prospects and identifies patterns that emerge from a review of the literature in the field.

Part 2 shifts to practical guidance, offering actionable recommendations for setting up and sustaining impactful collaborations. It covers essential steps like establishing a common language, engaging with communities, and maintaining long-term partnerships. This section also emphasises the importance of collective reflective practices, featuring a series of workshops and principles designed to enhance collaboration and ensure lasting impact.

Acknowledgments

This Blueprint was created in the close collaboration of six academic institutions. Authors of this book are members of the international **Social Design Network**. The consortium was led by Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design Budapest with partners from the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, the Estonian Academy of Arts, the Berlin University of the Arts, the Shenkar College of Engineering, Design and Art, and the ELISAVA Barcelona School of Design and Engineering.

Curiosity drives us to develop better, more inclusive, just, and creative outcomes every time we collaborate. Now, we are grateful to each other and the communities and stakeholders around us for the opportunity and the countless hours and efforts we were able to invest into the co-creation of this book.

We acquired a tremendous amount of new knowledge through discussions, debate, and knowledge sharing. We hope that it will be useful for potential change makers, agents of social innovation, and their collaborators who are actively working towards positive social transformation, or who are wishing to engage in socially-oriented, collaborative design projects.

We as authors and co-creators of this book express our gratitude to the academic institutions that provided professional and nurturing support to our team and to our NGO partners, OfficineVispa and the Democratic Society. We also would like to thank the external reviewers for their valuable feedback and insightful suggestions, which significantly contributed to improving the quality of this work.

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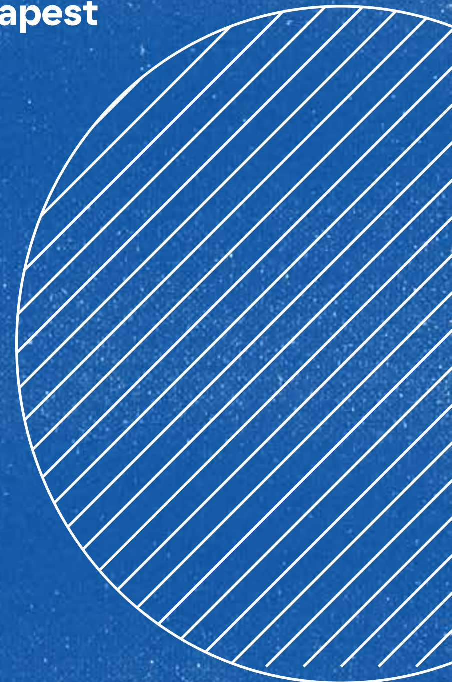
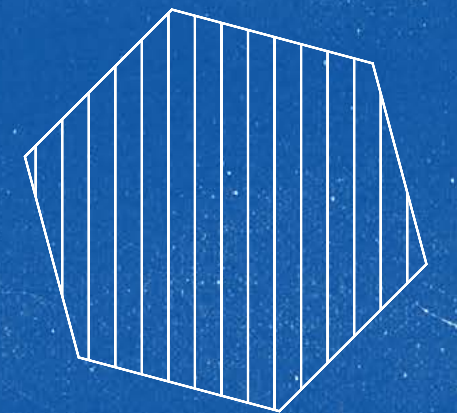


Involved NGOs



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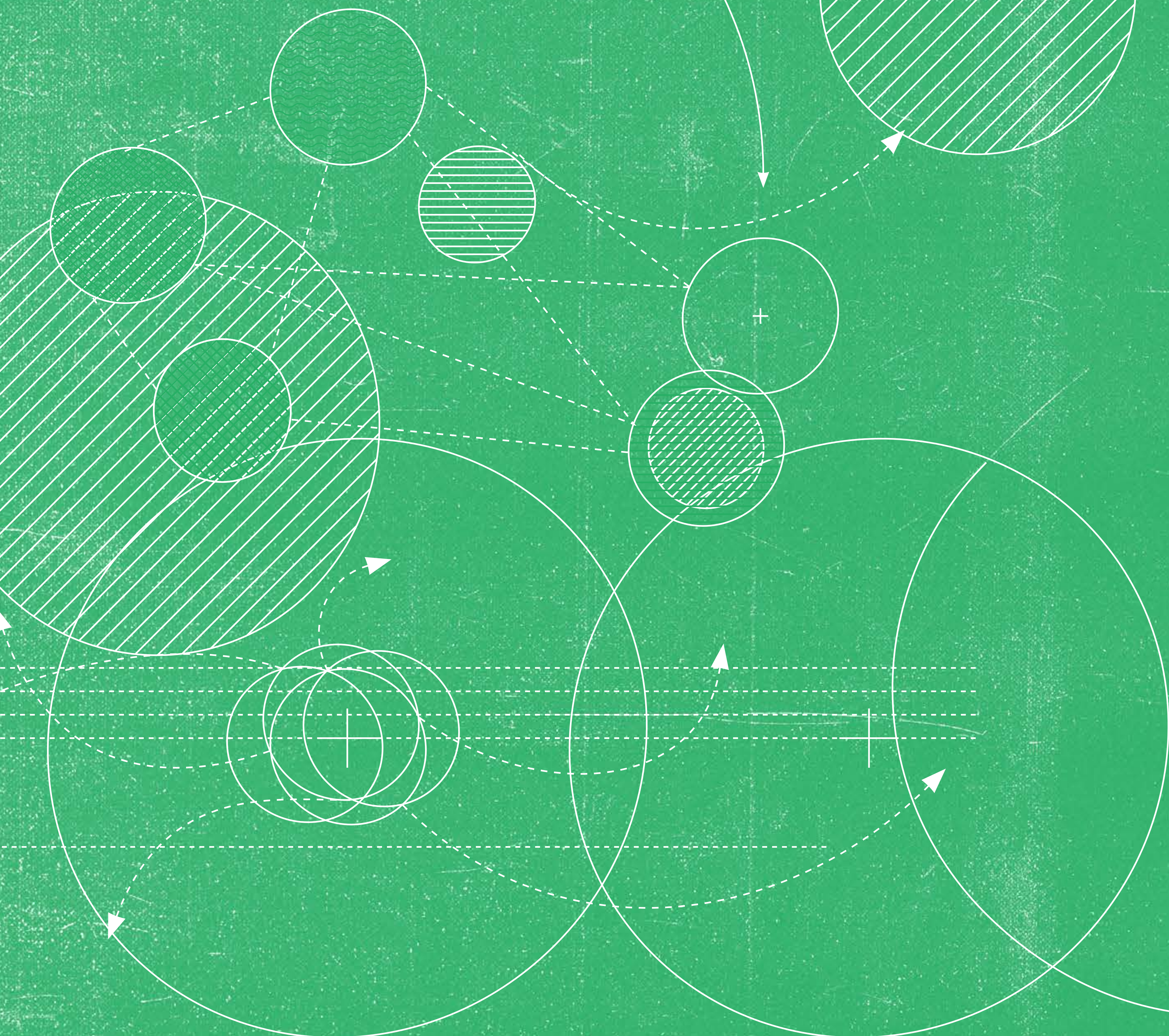
PART 01



The first part of the Blueprint presents a comprehensive exploration of collaborative social design projects between higher educational institutions (HEIs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), structured into three distinct chapters. First, it offers a succinct review of pertinent literature, delving into the key definitions, critical issues, exemplary case studies, and existing knowledge gaps within this interdisciplinary domain. This foundational review sets the stage by elucidating the theoretical underpinnings and practical complexities inherent in initiatives aimed at integrating academic expertise with the operational realities of social organizations.

The second chapter of Part 1 presents empirical research derived from extensive qualitative interviews and a concise qualitative questionnaire. These interviews were conducted with design educators, researchers, and practitioners affiliated with associations and social organizations across Europe and beyond. Through these empirical investigations, this part seeks to uncover nuanced insights into the lived experiences, the challenges faced, and the collaborative strategies employed in the context of social design projects. This section aims to enrich our understanding of the complex interplay and evolving dynamics within collaborative frameworks by synthesizing perspectives from diverse geographical and organizational contexts.

The last chapter discusses the outcomes and insights gleaned from two pilot projects, each conducted in a different country, that were part of the Change Agents project. Each pilot served as a dynamic platform for experiential learning, offering participants opportunities to navigate the intricate landscapes of cooperation among HEIs, NGOs, and local community stakeholders. Through structured engagements and iterative feedback mechanisms, these pilot projects aimed to co-create knowledge and practices that are contextually relevant and socially impactful. This part of the book highlights how these initiatives facilitated the cultivation of enduring partnerships and contributed to gathering insights that could potentially lead to the development of enhanced models for future collaborative endeavours in social design.

By integrating these three interrelated components — literature review, empirical research findings, and insights from the pilot projects — Part 1 aims to advance scholarly discourse and practical applications in the field of social design. It underscores the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration, ethical engagement, and community-centred approaches in addressing contemporary social challenges. Ultimately, this comprehensive examination seeks to inform and inspire stakeholders across academia, NGOs, and community members to foster innovative solutions that promote sustainable development and societal well-being on a global scale.

Gaps of Knowledge - Summary of the literature review

01

This chapter* discusses social design projects collaboratively carried out by universities and NGOs, focusing on the definitions they used, the main themes they addressed, the case studies they developed, and the knowledge gaps they revealed. Contrary to popular belief, defining this area within design theory and practice is far from easy. Some start with philosophy or ethics as the trigger; others turn to historical shifts in the 20th century. Some claim education is the key, while others prioritize community participation. There is also a pertinent debate about whether social design must be political from the outset, or whether it should remain apolitical.

While our review does not aim to prescribe specific methods or tools, it serves as a conceptual and practical guide for the activities of the project. Moreover, the review aims to facilitate knowledge-sharing and cross-pollination among the different research groups that participate in the project, each with their diverse perspectives and experiences.

* This summary was based on an extensive 90-page literature review. We compiled the literature for our analysis using a hybrid approach. First, we gathered sources from project members via an online survey. Then, we expanded this list by searching online platforms with survey keywords. After an initial reading phase, we curated over 50 sources. Finally, we used the snowball technique to include additional relevant documents.

1. Theoretical and Historical Background

Change is so pervasive in our lives that it almost eludes description and analysis. It is a fundamental metaphysical element of the perceived world present in both Eastern and Western philosophies. In the broadest sense, and at its simplest, change can be viewed as alteration, as emergence, as becoming. In contemporary philosophy, change can be understood as *"the difference between a thing T at time t_1 and at time t_2; as the replacement of one thing T by another thing T' at time t; or as the occurrence of an event at time t"* (Bunnin and Yu, 2004: 111).

For our purposes — and to centre the exploration — rather than defining what change is, we propose to focus on the agents (i.e. change agents) who accomplish this transformation *"between a thing T at time t_1 and at time t_2"*, and on examining how this process should occur. This thing T is the object of a design (or redesign) project and could be a tangible thing such as a product, or an intangible thing such as a service or a policy. But T could also be conceived as referring to notions that are usually not seen as a thing, like an experience.

...we propose to focus on the agents (i.e. change agents) who accomplish this transformation...

This development process is sometimes referred to as the 'theory of change' approach. According to the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNSDG, 2017), a theory of change is *"a method that explains how a given intervention, or set of interventions, is expected to lead to specific development change"*. From a practical perspective, this framework offers three key principles for developing a theory of change: 1) the process should be a collaborative effort between all relevant stakeholders; 2) it should be grounded in robust evidence at all stages; and 3) it should support continuous learning and improvement.

These principles are explored in our literature review (albeit structured differently), and are highlighted throughout the Blueprint. In itself, the Blueprint serves both as a theory of change and as a design tool. It aims to outline the main results of the project, and focuses on defining ways for academia and NGOs to collaborate in social design.

1.1 Finding a Way in Complexity: A Definition and Key Attributes of Social Design

As mentioned above, defining social design is challenging, partly because of its fluid nature. It encompasses a range of disciplines, expertise, stakeholders, and strategies. As Armstrong et al. (2014: 15) point out: *"Social design is a set of concepts and activities that exist across many fields of application […]. Although all designing can be understood as social, the term 'social design' highlights the concepts and activities enacted within participatory approaches to researching, generating and realising new ways to make change happen towards collective and social ends, rather than predominantly commercial objectives."* Indeed, from the get-go, we identify several key attributes, which include participation and generating new knowledge that focuses on social needs.

The need for macro-level social change also echoes Resnick's definition (2019: 3). Resnick defines social design as *"the practice of design*

where the primary motivation is to promote positive social change within society". However, while true in essence, this definition is still a bit vague and too broad both from a theoretical and a practical point of view.

In our eyes, one unique aspect of social design is its focus on a defined and articulated set of values and perspectives. Another distinguishing quality would be its approach towards local practices embedded in socio-cultural norms and traditions. Finally, a third key attribute of social design is that it is carried out with and for the community, and conducted through situated participatory practices. As such, the outcome of social design could be a set of work methods, improvement strategies, or a process of 'non-design', instead of a single, traditional product.

1.2 From Ergonomics to Community-driven Innovation: Highlights from the History of Social Design

Although delving into the history of social design is beyond the scope of this summary, we can see a shift towards recognising the complex physical and social elements of products, especially as they relate to ergonomics. Spurred by the New Deal and foreshadowing the economic growth of the 1930s and 1940s, design was perceived and portrayed to industrial manufacturers as a lubricant for the cogwheels of the economy. The technologically innovative stance it ushered in added an aura of passion to mass consumption. In this climate, Henry Dreyfuss' (2003 [1955]) influential book, Designing for People, presented a human-centred ideology based on the relatively rudimentary research practices of his time. Through the invented all-American figures of Joe and Josephine, Dreyfuss highlighted real issues of body types, ergonomics, ease of use, comfort, and more. As the definition of the standard allows for the non-standard, we can view Dreyfuss as a key forerunner of social design.

a theory of change: 1) the process should be a collaborative effort between all relevant stakeholders; 2) it should be grounded in robust evidence at all stages; and 3) it should support continuous learning and improvement.

However, while real issues of what we now call social design did surface in sporadic projects of the Bauhaus — such as Gropius' public housing — it was the second stage of the New Bauhaus at the Ulm School of Design (HfG) that raised the social flag. The innovative contribution of HfG to social design is largely attributed to its second rector Tomás Maldonado, who implemented a political and critical approach to design practice (Spitz, 2002). Maldonado emphasized the importance of addressing 'wicked questions' rather than producing more consumer products, a key point in contemporary social design. Indeed, Maldonado's (2019) emphasis on raising political questions and creating an impact on local and national communities still serves as a critical theoretical and practical foundation for social designers — along with Victor Papanek's (1970) Design for the Real World, which highlighted the importance of suitability. Interestingly, Alison Clarke (2021: 89) sheds light on Papanek's call to his students claiming that *"as socially and morally involved designers, we must address ourselves to the needs of a world with its back to the wall while the hands on the clock point perpetually to one minute before twelve"* (Papanek, 1970: xxvi).

Understandably, Papanek's oeuvre has not been untouched by well-placed criticism. First, while undeniably influential, his most significant contributions to the field of design have been largely focused on sustainability and ecological design. Second, and more importantly, the values Papanek based his book on remain somewhat opaque and undefined given the chaotic world we find ourselves in. Third, while social design is broadening its sphere to include local and national governments, NGOs, and other agents, Papanek's work remained largely confined to the industrial sector. Importantly, following these valuable contributions, we would like to treat design not only as a rational problem-solving activity, but as a cultural phenomenon with deep connections to the social relations, customs, rituals, and history into which design is integrated. This concept holds that design can and should be a way to create a significant change in society — a change that will be positive when it operates from within and for society.

Following in Papanek's footsteps, Margolin (2002) stresses several important shifts in the history of design as a practice. First, after the Industrial Revolution, designers shifted their focus from helping individuals and communities survive to introducing one mass-produced consumer product after another. Second, as locally-oriented workshops evolved into branded global entities driven by aggressive marketing, designers became an essential component of the market-focused business toolkit. Third, up to the end of the 20th century, designers often focused, first and foremost, on converting shapes into functional products. As the world becomes more cluttered with useless objects and we face global ecological disasters of an alarming scale, the dire consequences of our consumption frenzy become clearer.

1.3 Contemporary Approaches

Manzini offers an approach that differs slightly from Margolin's, reframing social design as 'design for social innovation'. He defines social) design as 'everything that expert design can do to activate, sustain, and orient processes of social change toward sustainability' (Manzini, 2015: 62). Furthermore, Manzini (2019) imagines a fluid, global, neo-liberal socio-cultural reality and stresses the importance of what he terms 'transformative social innovation'. This is conducted by an amalgam of individuals and communities, actively promoting and challenging social norms, conventions, and practices. Creating a theoretical bridge between Papanek and Manzini, Escobar (2017: 34) ponders the massive change design has gone through, from designing 'stuff' to designing almost everything: *"designing people and the environment back into situations also means displacing the focus from stuff to humans, their experiences and contexts."*

design can and should be a way to create a significant change in society — a change that will be positive when it operates from within and for society.

The shift in focus that Maldonado, Papanek, and Margolin point out — the elusive stance of designers to avoid tackling 'wicked problems' — is much deeper, and happened earlier than the second part of the 20th century. This shift could be attributed to three processes. First, triggered by the ethos of the Romantic Era, designers followed their own ego-driven desires. Second, during the 20th century, as marketing and design became more intertwined, designers frequently avoided addressing 'wicked problems', often excusing themselves with the line, 'it's not my job'. Third, designers have an immense impact on countless individuals and communities, therefore they must face various 'wicked problems' and offer suitable solutions. Additionally, social design should be more critical and raise more direct questions about power structures, inequality, sociocultural context, and other relevant factors. Suffice it to say, *"design is always a socio-material practice, one intimately linked to privilege and structures of inequality, white supremacy and heteronormativity, colonial power and epistemic violence, capitalist exploitation and environmental destruction"* (Mareis and Paim, 2021: 12).

Taking various socially-oriented design strategies such as inclusive design, participatory design, and empathic design, Ventura and Bichard (2018) highlight several drawbacks to these classic approaches. Inclusive design, while extremely important, tends to focus too much on industry and applied solutions, and less on key value systems and political impact on the communities themselves (see also Ventura & Dotan, 2018). The same could be said of participatory design. In this context, we should highlight the concept of generativity: participatory tools enhance working with communities, yet as an approach, while certainly not neutral, it is politically agnostic as it does not prescribe a specific worldview. Sometimes the project is led by an insider — as it happens with design-activism projects — while on other occasions it is led by an active outsider, the designer. Ventura and Bichard offer a definition of social design that builds on various socially-oriented design strategies with several key additions: social design is inherently political; it is based on the active participation of a community; it is not merely a redesign but rather a necessity; it is embedded in context; it is inclusive; and it requires a long research process. These attributes resonate with Tromp and Vial's (2022) portrayal of social design as a 'murky' and 'problematic discipline to define'. They propose five components that contribute to a broad and rather flexible concept of the ethical common good: care-driven activities for the well-being of underprivileged people; responsiveness-driven activities for good governance (like the approach of the Change Agent project itself); political progress-driven activities for empowered citizens; social capital-driven activities for beneficiary communities; and finally, resilience-driven activities for sustainable future systems.

1.4 Intersections and Gaps: Social Design and Participatory Design

Indeed, while the dialogue between social design and participatory/co-design is almost natural and obvious, the latter is based on two innovative assumptions (Sanders & Stappers, 2008). First, that all people are creative, and everyone can actively contribute to the design process. Second: co-design and participatory practices are almost antithetical to the consumerist approach embedded in design practice. Not surprisingly, some of the key principles and practices of participatory design, including heritage, ethics, ethnography, methods, tools and techniques, and community involvement are key to social design as well.

Another interesting point of comparison is the shift between local and global relevance. While participatory and social design projects can be assimilated and applied to the global context, they typically germinate in, and are embedded into, the local sphere. This is also true of the importance of ethical considerations in participatory design, particularly given the potential power imbalances between designers and users (Robertson & Wagner, 2013; Guersenzvaig, 2021).

Interestingly, some researchers posit a theoretical lacuna in the aims and scope of social design, as well as its main areas of interest. Manzini's assertion about 'social innovation' has prompted other researchers and educators to recognize a gap between the outcomes of social design — often termed 'design for social innovation' (Manzini, 2019; Tonkinwise, 2019; Armstrong et al., 2014) — on the one hand and political or value-oriented areas on the other. This lacuna is also reflected in the actors themselves: researchers from higher education institutions (HEIs) versus designers from independent studios or representatives of NGOs. Many researchers are both educators at HEIs and work in studios or other practice-based venues. Indeed, values and ideologies are not exclusive to HEIs, nor are NGOs and local government agencies cut off from other stakeholders. Many workshops and courses at HEIs are conducted with and for NGOs and other third-sector organisations. Indeed, while not all social design ventures tackle 'wicked problems' due to either limited resources (another pressing issue for social designers) or a lack of time, we can safely claim, following Margolin's (2019) remark, that they focus on *"doing social good"*.

1.5 Ethics and Social Justice

Ethics, participatory strategies, and politics-in-action are especially important when conducting joint projects with NGOs and local communities. While generally speaking, social design focuses on a group of people bound by a specified geographic location, digital or virtual projects could focus on the classic Andersonian definition of 'imagined communities'. As DiSalvo et al. (2013) rightfully stress, sharing the same location does not sufficiently define a social group as a community. Identity and socio-cultural or other shared interests are crucial elements as well. Importantly, while common interests or a defined geographical location are indeed crucial for understanding communities, we need to acknowledge that a community is diverse and multi-faceted. Because of this unique human characteristic, implementing participatory practices in social design is especially important when it comes to Community Based Organisations (CBOs) or NGOs. A major difference in working with CBOs or NGOs is their lack of resources compared to other organisations, private or public. Another related approach, titled 'socially responsible design', incorporates several, similar attributes (Cipolla & Bartholo, 2014: 90). In this approach, the designer focuses on participating with communities, embracing interdisciplinarity, building capacity rather than dependency, designing beyond traditional design outcomes, and creating fundamental, sustainable change. This approach lies between socially-oriented design and viewing the designer as an agent of societal change.

...social design is inherently political; it is based on the active participation of a community; it is not merely a redesign but rather a necessity; it is embedded in context; it is inclusive; and it requires a long research process.

During our research, it became necessary to define both the role of the designer in a social context and the imperative to trigger change. We argue that in social design, the collaborative efforts with and for the community extend beyond any brief description of the design process. However, the remaining attributes described by Cipolla & Bartholo above align with the core principles of social design in general and are particularly relevant to working with local communities and NGOs. Apart from the obvious need for empathy in social innovation projects, Cipolla and Bartholo (ibid.) also highlight the importance of dialogue as a key to creating meaningful and shared interpretations in these projects.

To conclude this part, we can highlight several interesting points. First, we do not perceive social design as an 'either-or' process. The outcomes of a single project can be applicable in actual practice (such as an app, a set of methodologies, a blueprint, or an actual product); alternatively, they can be ideological in nature; also, they can implement a dialogic structure between the stakeholders (such as NGOs, a community, and a design studio). Typically, all three scenarios apply. Second, while all social design ventures aim to improve our social and environmental spheres, under this broad umbrella we can still identify a specific set of values unique to each venture. Third, an NGO, as a key partner, differs significantly from other typical stakeholders due to its ideological nature, reliance on volunteers and pro-bono contribution, and its complex relationship with the industrial and commercial sectors. This brings a distinct dimension to working with an NGO.

2. Methodological Considerations and Challenges

This section highlights diverse trends and interpretations within social design. Our goal was to prompt internal discussions within the Change Agents project team about methodological and theoretical themes and gaps to be addressed in the rest of the project.

The various themes and approaches discussed in the review share a common view of design as a strategic tool within systems undergoing change. They emphasise the need for tactics and methods adaptable to diverse participants to explore both the issues at hand and pathways for change (Figure 1). They focus on uncovering social complexities, framing design not merely as problem-solving but as problem-finding, and fostering possibilities for world-making amidst value plurality and dissensus.

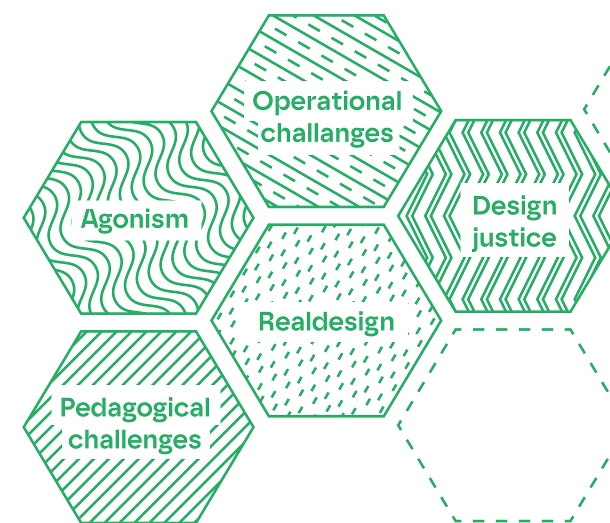


Figure 1. Themes and approaches discussed

The discussion aims to tackle multidimensional societal challenges, framing issues for action and revealing new challenges while prioritising deeper understanding over consensus-building. The modes and perspectives (Figure 2) favour open-ended processes, interpretation, and meaning-making, diverging from linear problem-solving approaches. They aim to integrate diverse perspectives to envision preferred futures, often embracing conflict as a catalyst for innovation and new insights.

2.1 Agonism and Capabilities

Following a notion proposed by the political philosopher Chantal Mouffe (2000), social design methods and approaches can be characterised as 'agonistic'. These methods are well suited to navigating disagreement and contestation. They encourage exploring differences instead of resolving disputes, thereby challenging the dominant authority and opening possibilities for new configurations of communal life to emerge. Critical design methods such as adversarial design materialise dissensus and contestation in order to bring power dynamics into the forefront and to provoke reflection on alternative societal arrangements. These methods serve as social design experiments creating artefacts and systems facilitating inquiry into modern, democratic life. Participatory and co-design methods prioritise core principles of participation, facilitating mutual learning among multiple participants in collective reflection-in-action.

Social design focuses on the common good, but this is too abstract as a concept. In the review, the notion of 'capability' (a more precise term than 'capacity') is proposed to be taken as a robust underpinning to conceptualise (social) design's purpose in terms of the contribution to others' well-being and the common good (Guersenzvaig, 2001).

2.2 Navigating Modal Shifts and Power Dynamics

The literature shows that designers exhibit modal shifts between activities, alternating attention between different aspects of their task, such as drawing, gathering information, sketching, and evaluating results. These shifts also manifest themselves in social and participatory design, shaping how methods are employed within projects. Unlike traditional stages or phases, we focus on modes and perspectives because they describe the overarching goals of activities rather than the chronological sequence. They guide project development in a non-linear, iterative fashion, with modal shifts guiding the project's progression

in a loop-like manner, rather than a linear path from discovery to result stages.

Modes, as defined by Kimbell and Julier (2012), include 1) exploring, 2) making sense, 3) proposing, and 4) iterating, while Bratteteig et al. (2012) focus on core perspectives like 1) having a say, 2) mutual learning, and 3) co-creation (see Figure 2).

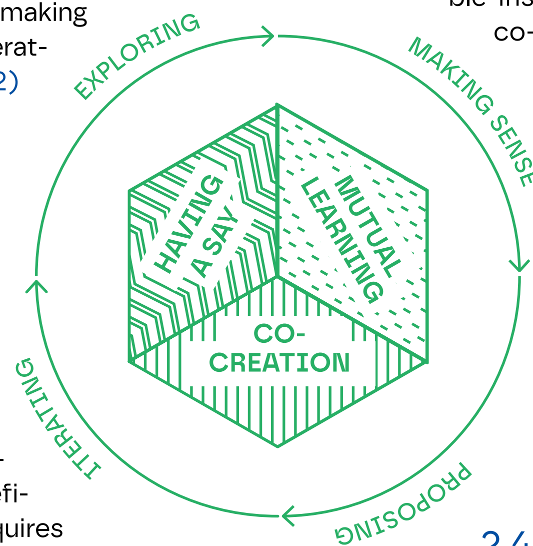


Figure 2. Modes and perspectives

All of these notions are strategic but 'having a say' is particularly relevant: it means that stakeholders actively participate in the conception, development, and definition of the project. This requires a truly collaborative process, rather than a merely consultative one. However, this is easier said than done. True participation is fraught with social issues related to power dynamics and (epistemic) justice. The dimensions of these tensions are well-known and include gender, ethnicity, age, ability, social class or caste, as well as religion, among other vectors.

According to Bratteteig et al. (2012: 130), some aspects of projects that are influenced by power dynamics are:

- agenda control: what is discussed and who decides the themes;
- participants: who is invited to participate;
- scope: which solutions are possible and which problems are addressed;
- resources: available time and people.

2.3 Operational Challenges

Bratteteig et al. (2012) highlight the gradual expansion of the field of application for participatory design, shifting from a focus on working conditions and ICT to a broader range of contexts. One of the challenges is establishing access to users and their environments, particularly outside of traditional work settings. When direct access is limited, methods like diaries and logging are used. Introduced by Gaver et al. (1999), 'cultural probes' allow participants to express experiences and attitudes, thereby shaping designers' understanding and inspiration.

Addressing 'mixed reality environments' (encompassing online and offline interactions) poses another challenge. Adapting to these environments has become crucial, especially amid the pandemic, pushing social design to renew its methods. Fuad-Luke et al. (2020) respond to these challenges with eco-social and participatory design principles, generating actionable insights and prototypes through co-creation workshops.

Despite these challenges, participatory approaches have expanded into diverse fields like work, education, urban planning, health, and activism. The breadth of application underscores the importance of continually evolving participatory design methodologies to suit varied contexts and challenges.

2.4 Design Justice: A Shift Towards Community Ownership

Costanza-Chock (2020) emphasises the inherently political nature of design processes, where power dynamics intersect with class, gender, and race. Even within supposedly participatory projects, power imbalances persist, affecting interactions between family members, workers, bosses, citizens, and civil servants. This highlights the coercive potential of power relations.

A significant challenge is the occurrence of extractive practices within supposedly inclusive design processes, where community members contribute ideas that are then appropriated for profit by professional designers and corporations. Design justice, as advocated by Costanza-Chock, calls for a shift towards approaches that prioritise community ownership, profit, credit, and visibility.

Drawing on Bezdek's (2013) work, Costanza-Chock suggests applying Arnstein's ladder as a heuristic for assessing the strength of participation, ranging from nominal consultation to substantive governance. This underscores the importance of accountability, leadership, and community control in design projects.

From a design justice perspective, the phrase "nothing about us without us" emphasises the need for community leadership and ownership in design processes, acknowledging the unique insights and innovations community members bring. This necessitates a transition from sponsor-led or designer-led efforts to community-led initiatives.

In sum, participatory approaches alone are insufficient; a shift towards community-led efforts, guided by clear values, is essential. Design practitioners operating from a design justice approach view questions of political power from the perspective of the common good, recognizing communities' inherent capacity to address challenges and resist oppression.

Costanza-Chock (2020: 98) lists several practical recommendations:

- Adopt co-design methods.
- Develop specific, concrete mechanisms for community accountability.
- Centrally position community needs over tools.
- Invest in education (both formal and informal) focusing on spreading co-design methods among an array of practitioners.
- Create tech clinics, modelled on legal clinics.
- Avoid "parachuting" technologists into communities; i.e., isolated "social good" technology projects, devoid of context.
- Stop reinventing the wheel.
- Support maintenance, not just "innovation". It is important to update, improve, and maintain already proven tools.

Design justice, as advocated by Costanza-Chock, calls for a shift towards approaches that prioritise community ownership, profit, credit, and visibility.

2.5 Just Design

Nassim Parvin (2023) considers the difficult connections between design and justice, exposing how products and technologies can perpetuate injustices like racism, sexism, ableism, and colonialism. These lenses offer a framework for designers and social design practitioners to scrutinise their work on both individual and systemic levels. Parvin contends that technologies are inherently political, emphasising the relevance of power dynamics in design inquiry and questioning whose interests technologies serve and prioritise.

Consider, for instance, the case of safety belts, which, while making car travel safer overall, disproportionately benefit men, as their design is based on crash-test dummies modelled on the "average" male body. Caroline Criado Perez (2019) highlights how this design oversight leads to increased risks and injuries for women in car accidents, revealing deeper societal biases embedded in design practices.

Parvin warns against simplistic approaches to advancing social justice, cautioning that even well-intentioned efforts can be clouded by ideological dogma. Design teams must grapple with the complex power dynamics entrenched in social institutions and artefacts, recognizing design's role in perpetuating unjust power structures.

Examples abound — from the aforementioned safety belt issue, to predictive policing apps that disproportionately target marginalised communities, and the gendered politics of digital assistants like Alexa and Siri. Parvin's analysis underscores the need for designers to critically examine the social implications of their work and strive for more equitable and just outcomes in their design practices.

Parvin emphasises the necessity of participatory methods rooted in a liberatory and democratic ethos, amplifying the voices of those traditionally marginalised in knowledge-making processes. However, Parvin cautions that participation alone does not guarantee design justice, stressing the importance of grounding design work in diverse perspectives and feminist, antiracist, and decolonial ways of knowing. Without this foundation, designers risk becoming mere facilitators, diminishing their accountability for the outcomes. Parvin grapples with normative questions about social justice and ethical action, urging designers to navigate complexities thoughtfully and critically rather than relying solely on good intentions. Ultimately, Parvin advocates for a restoration of design ethics as a rigorous inquiry into the complex and messy realities of design situations, challenging designers to engage politically and historically in their practice.

- As practical guidance, Parvin discerns two necessary conditions for advancing social justice in and through design:
- making design processes more inclusive through democratic strategies, such as participatory and co-design methods, and
- recognizing design as a mode of practical ethical inquiry — one that prescribes radical changes to design education and practice.

2.6 From Good Intentions to 'Realdesign'

Von Busch and Palmås (2023a; 2023b) offer a critical perspective on design, arguing that despite designers' intentions of empathy and participatory approaches, the long-term effects often neglect power dynamics and social corruption. They contend that the outcomes rarely match the lofty promises,

leaving participants disillusioned while designers capitalise on new funding opportunities.

To counter this idealism, they advocate for 'a healthy dose of political realism', urging designers to recognize the inherent power dynamics in participatory projects. They emphasise the conflictive nature of social interactions, which contrasts with the notion of polite exchanges. The challenge, they propose, lies in integrating scepticism into design processes without succumbing to cynicism. They advocate for 'Realdesign', a pragmatic approach informed by 'Realpolitik', which acknowledges themes like betrayal, corruption, cunning, and hypocrisy in social design.

... participation alone does not guarantee design justice, stressing the importance of grounding design work in diverse perspectives and feminist, antiracist, and decolonial ways of knowing.

Betrayal, for them, stems from the transformation of dissensus into consensus, ultimately betraying participants' interests, echoing Mouffe's warning about preserving agonism. Corruption refers to the decay of socially-oriented designs over time, often due to external socio-political influences. Cunning pertains to design's ability to reinvent governance structures under the guise of empathy, while hypocrisy means navigating these challenges with a degree of scepticism without succumbing to cynicism.

Their proposal of 'Realdesign' aims to address these issues by providing principles and questions for designers to consider, aligning with discussions on design justice by other scholars like Costanza-Chock and Parvin:

- → Who is the user or stakeholder? What is in their interest?
- → Who is the client? What is in their interest?
- → Who do you report to? What is in their interest?
- → Who is invited/included and who is excluded in the present and historical contexts?
- → What are the structural and institutional frameworks around this action?
- → How is agency and power redistributed, who is offered power, who is it withdrawn from?
- → How is the 'social' (relations of loyalty and commitments) redistributed or reformed?
- → Who earns what in the end?
- → How can reimbursement/compensation for the weakest be guaranteed, or how must they mobilise to enhance their leverage?

2.7 Pedagogical Challenges

The reviewed literature (Ahmed, 2021; Ansari and Kiem, 2021; Flesler et al., 2021; Guersenzvaig, 2021; Escobar, 2017; Tunstall, 2023) highlights other considerations regarding anti-racist, anti-colonial, non-ableist, and feminist design practices in educational settings. Moving beyond mere rule-following, a strong ethical framework is essential, enabling designers to discern what is just in complex ethical situations. This requires a nuanced understanding that goes beyond traditional ethical theories, similar to how knowing the history of typography alone does not guarantee proper type spacing.

In design education, the focus should not be solely on imparting rules but on nurturing ethical know-how through reflection in-action and on-action. Design justice, incorporating anti-racist, anti-colonial, non-ableist, and feminist perspectives, must be integrated into teaching practices. A Socratic approach, centred on asking critical questions, can foster ethical reflection and the discomfort necessary for transformation.

Challenges arise in reframing design problems from an expansive justice perspective, especially within existing institutional structures. Critiques highlight the need for a deeper transformation of design education, challenging Eurocentric knowledge construction and embracing alternative epistemologies. However, this transformation is hindered both by the entrenched neoliberal capitalist structures and the superficial mainstreaming of decolonial discourse.

Efforts to decolonize design require radical changes, including ceding power to marginalised voices, dismantling biases in design history, and prioritising structural changes over diversity initiatives. This necessitates a profound re-evaluation of existing resources and priorities.

While navigating these changes is complex and challenging, it is a necessary step toward creating just and inclusive design spaces. Acknowledging mistakes, learning from them, and actively engaging in the work of decolonization are essential for moving towards genuinely just spaces, despite the daunting obstacles.

3. Cases

Case studies are one of the most relevant ways for designers to gain knowledge and insights from other practitioners. They explain and discuss how the complexities of a project were navigated, capturing the details and unexpected nuances. Social design projects can vary enormously in topic, size, methods, outcomes, or impact, but they share some common topics for reflection that we will try to outline in this section.

This section is informed by and built around considerations found in case studies from the literature discussed in the previous sections, as well as from sources that focus their contribution on providing information about specific projects. These sources include books that discuss a selection of social design projects and additionally offer reflections on the issues these cases raise. Descriptions tend to focus on how the project came to be, the general issues they addressed, and the positive change they brought about. However, comments usually focus on design phases and methods that resulted in a successful project outcome, rather than presenting and discussing operational challenges, problems, difficulties encountered during the process, or learning outcomes. In contrast, this review uses case studies from the literature to shed light on these often overlooked aspects. It is worth mentioning that there is a lack of literature focusing on NGO-academic collaboration through social design that addresses these aspects. This underscores the importance of the research undertaken in the Change Agents project.

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3.1 Approaches and Frameworks

In the introductory chapter to the case studies presented in LEAP Dialogues, Andrew Shea points to some core values in the field of social design: empathy, co-creation, inclusion, accessibility, equality, and transparency (Amatullo et al., 2016: 257). Indeed, these are concepts that appear in the description or are inherent to most of the projects referenced in the literature review. In a brief section on design education, also in LEAP Dialogues, Allan Chochinov highlights 'empathic', 'conversation', 'listening', or 'confidence' as common terms appearing in design educators' comments when defining the skills they believe tomorrow's social designers will need (Amatullo et al., 2016: 324). When reading these professionals' comments in full, other concepts appear such as responsibility, criticality, values, meaning, positive change, fairness, equity, experimentation, enthusiasm, intuitiveness, humility, optimism, respect, collaboration, imagination, curiosity, patience, and confidence (ibid. 326-331). All these terms are key to understanding social design's framework and the approaches designers take in these types of projects.

The aforementioned concepts have already been introduced in previous sections, where we outlined the diverse ways in which design can be used to address social issues and create positive change in the world (see page 10).

The operational scale of social design projects can be very different, and so are the theoretical approaches they convey or the conflicts they address. Building on the key concepts covered in the previous sections, one can identify cases that focus on issues related to inequality, gender, race, colonialism, ableism and health, sustainable development, or community engagement.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) that incorporate a social design approach in their curricula generate many interesting projects. Assignments can have an open brief related to one or more of the aforementioned topics, or may be developed in collaboration with NGOs or institutions, and the approach can be either research- or practice-driven. We acknowledge that a systematic analysis and clustering of these projects would be a relevant research topic in order to better understand them and to identify opportunities.

3.2 Common Problems and Difficulties

Since designing is a complex process, different types of conflicts, problems, challenges, and difficulties may arise during a project. Documenting and sharing case studies can help others understand possible eventualities or lacunas and avoid reproducing them in other projects, or at least become aware of them. In this review

we have identified the following common topics: impact, changing behaviours and conflicting concerns, decision-making, time, and budget.

- **Impact:** When assessing social design projects, impact measurement should be taken into account. Designers should consider which methods to use to gather insightful information and to successfully meet the challenge of being perceived as a legitimate or relevant player.
- **Changing behaviours and conflicting concerns:** Co-creation and dialogue are key aspects in social design projects. Designers should prioritise design's impact on the community over personal interests. Social design is about changing people's behaviour — they take on new roles during the problem-solving process in the design phase and ultimately lead different, hopefully improved, lives after the project is implemented. The designers should also adapt their behaviour to the characteristics of specific social design projects.
- **Decision-making:** In community-based projects, the active participation of community members and researchers leads to complex decision-making processes. These complexities arise from factors such as some agents' lack of understanding of the community's needs, language barriers, poor role definition, practices related to the exercise of power, or mentality. From the perspective of epistemic justice, which we discussed earlier, participatory design should be pluralistic in all regards. Building trust between all agents should be at its core, and the participants' background should not be a barrier to having their views and skills taken into account.
- **Time:** The timeframe of a project determines its possibilities, methods, and outcomes. Although social design aims for long-term sustainability, a good quantity of projects presented in the literature reviewed are discrete interventions spanning a relatively short time, and several are not active anymore. So, what is the impact of social design when a project temporarily improves the conditions of a place or community but suddenly loses its originators or simply comes to an abrupt end? How is the local community supposed to fill the void, or take over the initiative without the funds or people who have been dedicating paid time for the project? Timing is also critical in collaborations with HEIs. Since the academic calendars are quite fixed, the collaboration may not occur at a time that is the most adequate for other project participants, and its duration may be inadequate. But even when the timing is right, the approach may not show the complexity of social design projects, and collaborative processes may not unfold as they typically would in a professional context.
- **Budget:** The cost of a social design project is related to a collective endeavour typically involving a substantial amount of dedicated hours. The budget of a project has a direct effect on its outputs and quality as well as on the project's longevity. Social design projects regularly, but not always, end up with a digital medium format — websites, apps, social media, chatbots... — whose technical infrastructures require ongoing maintenance beyond project completion. This technical issue can lead to the discontinuation of a project and, in consequence, diminish the project's social impact.

3.3 Strategies for Community Engagement

Design practice leads to design knowledge, hence the importance of drawing conclusions from first-hand experience — or the experiences of others. Andrew Shea (2012) lists community engagement strategies for designers, extracted from learning outcomes of the case studies presented in Designing for Social Change — all done within educational frameworks — that align with the themes outlined in this review:

- Immerse yourself in the community and design with them, not for them.
- Build trust to get better insights and learn how to best help the community.
- Promise only what you can deliver, taking into account the time and resources at hand.
- Prioritise process in order to create a design that tackles the issue with a fresh perspective and avoids sticking to premature and fixed ideas.
- Confront controversy to unlock the real nature of the problem.
- Identify the community's strengths and highlight them in the proposed design solution.
- Utilise local resources, either material ones or in relation to the skills and talents of community members.
- Design with the community's voice, taking into account local languages, cultural norms, and literacy levels.
- Give communities ownership by fostering their learning of the design process and tools so they can use them in the future.

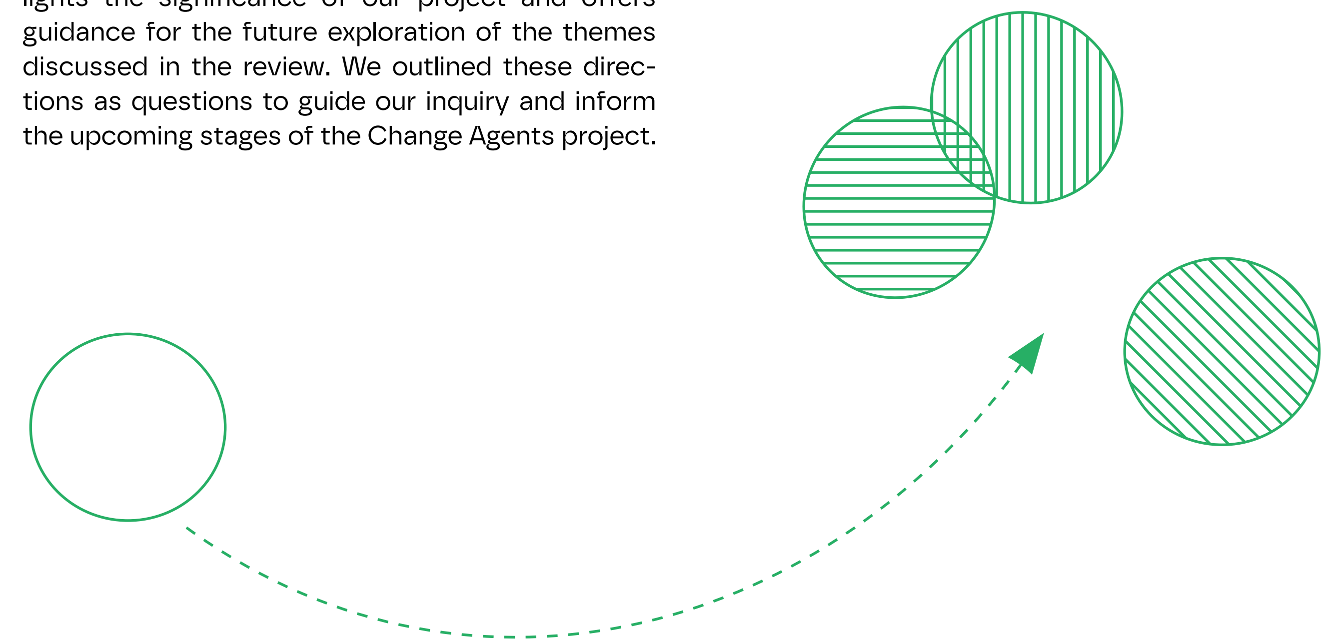
Solidify your partnership with a sustained engagement and maintain your involvement with the community after the initial goals have been achieved.

As we have seen throughout this overview, social capital is key to sustaining these projects. When working with communities one should focus on stakeholders' needs, constraints, and interests — that is, whatever community members are already interested in — rather than proposing new activities. In this regard, people involved at the grassroots level should be the cornerstone of each project. At the same time, it is important to consider macro-level agents and operate across both the micro and macro spectrum (Amatullo et al., 2016: 283).

While project participants may dedicate their efforts primarily to implementing the participatory framework and generating outputs during the available time, some additional documentation could be useful for increasing the project's sustainability. Also, research should be done during the project to identify and document what worked and why. This can then serve as the basis for exporting the experience gained to new areas, thereby informing future social design practitioners.

4. Looking Ahead

In the last section of the review, we reflected on our findings and looked ahead by posing questions aligned with the goals of the Change Agents project. While our literature review yielded descriptive insights, we found a lack of scholarly sources on the theoretical and methodological aspects of social design projects involving NGOs. This highlights the significance of our project and offers guidance for the future exploration of the themes discussed in the review. We outlined these directions as questions to guide our inquiry and inform the upcoming stages of the Change Agents project.



PART 01

Benefits and Challenges from Global Practice - Mapping analysis

02

2. Benefits and Challenges Identified Through the Analysis of Global Practices

After outlining our theoretical background, we conducted an extensive mapping exercise that incorporated two complementary methodologies: empirical research based on qualitative interviews, followed by a brief qualitative questionnaire. Coupled with the theoretical background, the empirical research served as a base for two case studies, which were conducted in Germany and Italy, respectively. These will be presented in the last section of Part 1 (see page 30).

During the mapping stage, we conducted 19 one-hour-long interviews involving representatives of the design and academic field, as well as civil activists of various local and global NGOs. In several cases, interviewees explained their overlapping positions between academia and the world of NGOs. Following the classic ethnographic research guideline, we chose interviewees according to diverse professional narratives, lived experiences, cultural contexts, and more (see Brinkman, 2013 and Denzin, 2008). In each case, the nine European (Belgian, Dutch, Estonian, German, Italian, Spanish, Swiss) and ten non-European (American, Argentinian, Namibian, Brazilian, Canadian, Mexican) interviewees introduced their participatory design projects implemented all together in 12 different countries (such as in the USA, Mexico, Spain, Germany, Costa Rica, Estonia, etc.), each bringing unique backgrounds and perspectives to the discussion on design for social impact. Among them were, according to their own self-description, industrial designers, service, graphic, and interaction designers, social innovation design experts, activists engaged in planetary social transition, visual and multimedia artists working for civic participation, professors of eco-social design, and members of non-profit organisations and community initiatives. Their varied insights highlighted the interdisciplinary nature of social design.

The interviews were structured around a core discussion guide integrating several key notions, allowing for fluid follow-up questions, aiming to explore and understand the lived experiences and insights of the interviewed experts. Although the interviews followed a semi-structured qualitative approach, they were conducted with enough flexibility to accommodate the distinct contexts of each interviewee (Brinkmann, 2013). The transcribed and indexed interviews (Wengraf, 2001) were manually coded and analysed following the classic qualitative research principle of meta-thematic interpretation. This approach is rooted in the concept of 'polyvocal dialogue' between the interviewer and interviewee (Brinkmann, 2018). We used colour codes to represent themes, patterns, and main and sub-topics, alongside numerical codes to anonymize the interviewees, and visualized the data on a shared online platform. Wherever possible, we applied in vivo codes, using the interviewees' own words to maintain a close connection to the data. Through cross-checking, we re-examined the transcripts and reassessed the coding whenever necessary to enhance accuracy and clarity. This was particularly important because of the highly differentiated nature of academic design professionals and local NGOs, as the two groups differ significantly in terms of their spheres of activity, ideologies, and approaches to professional knowledge acquisition. Moreover, as with social design and participatory design, it became necessary to account for the diverse contextual angles in approaching a design situation. Accordingly, we took special care to avoid imposing a 'monopoly of interpretation' by sharing knowledge with the interviewees and following an inclusive, dialogic approach wherever possible. Once we mapped the interviews, we saw that several questions either remained unanswered or generated an insufficient amount of data. To address this, we distributed a concise qualitative questionnaire among the interviewees. The questionnaire comprised a few carefully selected questions targeting specific gaps. The questionnaire was answered by nine out of the 20 original interviewees.

Importantly, when conducting this process of reduction and interpretation, we followed two important principles: (1) presenting the data as authentically and inclusively as possible, and (2) keeping our interpretation as transparent as we could (Dahler-Larsen, 2008). During the analysis process, we navigated between the macrostructure of the narrative (the overlapping and overarching theoretical concepts of our study) and the microstructure of the narrative (the personal and context-related stories of each interviewee). In interpreting the data, we chose an inductive rather than deductive approach, since *"[t]he researcher must come to the transcripts with an open attitude, seeking what emerges as important and of interest from the text"* (Seidman, 2019: 126). Following the ethical restrictions of qualitative research, we maintained the anonymity of the interviewees while preserving the integrity of their quotes, albeit shortening them in some cases (Delamont and Atkinson, 2018; Brinkmann, 2013), a technique referred to as 'meaning condensation' (see Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). In the next stage of analysing the interviews, the statements quoted from the interviewees were edited for clarity and readability. While the original words may have been adjusted to improve flow and coherence, the core meaning and intent of the interviewees' messages were carefully preserved.

As a result of the mapping analysis, we could identify several interconnected patterns.

2.1 Terminology and Definitions from the Practitioners' Perspectives

As highlighted in the literature review, defining social design proved challenging — partly due to the gap between theory and practice, and partly because of the diverse approaches across various design sub-disciplines. As one of them (No. 8) stated, interviewees faced similar dilemmas: *"I think [...] design is in itself social [...] so it's not a very helpful term"*. Others suggested alternative terms such as 'eco-social design' (Interviewee No. 4), 'conversation design' (No. 6), 'socially- or politically-engaged, or neighbourhood-oriented design' (No. 8), 'community-centred design' (No. 9), and 'civic design' (No. 18).

Regarding the detailed definition of social design, some shared patterns arose from the interviews: (1) active participation and community engagement, (2) the facilitating role of designers, (3) the goal of addressing structural inequities, and (4) the correlation between social design and social justice.

As one interviewee noted, *"I feel that social design and design justice are the same in a sense. [...] Design justice must be led by the members of the communities because they are the ones who are going to lead everything, and designers are just facilitators. I think the main goal of design justice is to challenge the structural inequities. Social design starts with people. It starts by asking questions, and it starts by prioritising people"* (No. 1). This perspective aligns with classic theoretical texts by Dreyfuss and Papanek, which advocate shifting the focus of practitioners from market-oriented concerns to working for the people. While the market-oriented approach claims that all design is social due to its focus on people, we propose a different approach — one that underscores values, diverse priorities, and co-creation.

Collaboration with neighbourhood communities played a significant role in several projects mentioned by the interviewees (No. 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 14, 15, 16, 17). The shift from a broad social focus to a more localized, communal approach underscores the importance of co- and participatory design practices. These practices, central to social design, are conducted with and for the communities, therefore many interviewees highlighted the importance of renegotiating the roles between the community and the designers:

"It has to be taught in schools that we have limited expertise. Solutions do not come from us. [...] Our role must be as facilitators. We facilitate the process with the people. We must integrate people in the process from beginning to end" (No. 1).

This quote illustrates the well-known role of the social designer as a mediator (Ventura, 2011), emphasising the dialogic nature of this role as not only a translator but also as an interpreter of diverse knowledge and practices.

Many interviewees highlighted the focus on non-profit venues, stating that social design places the common good and positive social change at the centre (No. 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 9, 14, 16, 18). The tension between the core value of social design — "making the world a better place" — and the need for designers to make a living was a recurrent theme in the interviews.

An interesting definition offered by Interviewee No. 15 describes social design as 'philosophy in action', which beautifully encapsulates the ongoing dialogue between theory and practice that has been a hallmark of design throughout the last century.

2.2 Customizing Design Research Methods for Real-World Challenges

One primary aim of the community-based projects discussed in the interviews was to actively engage students and provide them with practical exposure to real-world societal challenges. The intention was not merely to impart theoretical knowledge but to immerse students in the complexities of addressing issues within communities. To achieve this, the above-referenced projects adopted both traditional and participatory design

research methods, emphasising hands-on and collaborative approaches. However, the projects were developed in a wide variety of formats, including educational programmes for students and communities (such as seminars or semester-long courses), occupational workshops, as well as project series and training programmes. Some initiatives involved managing physical spaces for communities, such as makerspaces or innovation labs. On the other hand, the projects also focused on very different target groups: local communities, vulnerable groups (such as mentally challenged people, persons with migrant backgrounds, victims of violence, women, children, the elderly, bicyclist, and homeless and displaced people) but also other professionals and NGOs. This reflected well the flexible, value-oriented, and agonistic approaches discussed in the literature review (see page 10).

Most interviewees mentioned working under the same umbrella of participatory design and co-design, while applying critical thinking towards already developed methods. As complex dynamics cannot be simplified into one method (No. 7), Interviewee No. 8 said:

"We do not want to give them any kind of, let's say, blueprints, and then they follow it and it doesn't make sense. [...] The idea is that we develop the tools according to the project, and do not go with a hammer or bring the same kind of workshop in every project."

We learn from the interviewees (No. 2, 3, 5, 7, 10, 12, 13, 16) that design research has to be flexible and accumulative, allowing tools to shift, change, and be invented according to each design situation. Besides flexibility and openness, the interviews highlighted the particular importance of other skills and attitudes such as open and consistent communication (most repeated theme), *"positive dialogue"* (No. 3), trust, respect, active listening, awareness, empathy, and *"having a deep knowledge of social justice issues"* (No. 9). Interviewee No. 2 added the importance of reciprocity and the learning process, stating that *"the goal has always been learning and being reciprocal in the learning and then building capacity."*

From a research-oriented perspective, the tools and methods employed in these projects were diverse, ranging from the most frequently used in-depth and/or group interviews (mentioned by 14 interviewees), prototyping, and workshops (both mentioned 13 times), through informal conversations and events with the communities such as open discussions, community gatherings, visits, walks, forums, and seminars (12 times), to mapping (11 times) and observations (10 times). Several (9) interviewees mentioned their own toolkits or methods. Tools like brainstorming, analysing, and the usage of roadmaps, action plans, and benchmarking in strategic planning (each cited 8 times), exhibitions, generative tools, storytelling, and photo/video documentation (each mentioned 6 times) as well as podcasts, user experience/journey, questionnaires, and "How might we...?" questions (mentioned 5 times) were moderately popular (for a full list of the tools used, see Figure 3). The research approach extended beyond literature reviews and interviews, involving practical pilot projects implemented in different countries in order to innovate and apply the knowledge gained in real-world contexts, which demonstrates the hands-on, collaborative nature of these interinstitutional projects.

Overall, these interinstitutional projects go beyond the traditional teaching methods by immersing students in the dynamic and unpredictable nature of societal issues. However, as we shall see, this complex system is not without its challenges.

2.3 From Budget and Time Limitations to Emotional Overload: The Multifaceted Challenges of Social Design Collaborations

By their nature, social design projects face numerous challenges. These include communication and dialogic issues between institutions, design partners, NGOs, students, and members of the local community. Challenges also arise from budget constraints, differing worldviews, and the inherent differences between academic and non-academic organizations in terms of time and work management, expectations, and hierarchical structures.

Apart from these natural challenges, many interviewees highlighted the hardships of communication and mutual understanding between various organisations (No. 4, 6, 10, 11, 15). Effective communication extends beyond dialogue and the exchange of ideas, encompassing the translation of meaning between 'languages'. Shifting from an academic and somewhat theoretical lingo to a practical one presents a challenge. Bridging the gap between the 'real world' perspective typical of NGOs and the textbook approach of higher education can be another issue. Open and consistent communication, as well as finding a common language, were underscored by several interviewees regarding the articulation of different working methods (No. 5, 11, 15), limitations (No. 2, 5, 11, 14, 16), and the avoidance of unrealistic expectations between collaborating partners and communities (No. 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 13, 15).

Time management is a crucial element, as was confirmed by most of the interviewees (No. 2, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10, 11, 13, 15, 16, 18). Collaboration, interpretation, and coordination with different stakeholders takes time, as does creating a long-lasting impact. Furthermore, the perception of time varies among stakeholders. For instance, design research in academia requires a longer, more in-depth process, while local communities and other partners might strive for quick results to move forward the project. As one interviewee mentioned (No. 9.), project timing does not fit academic timing — highlighting a key challenge that results from the inconsistencies between the length of a semester and the needs of local communities. Additionally cultural differences between the various stakeholders (teachers, students, NGOs, and local communities) and the time needed to understand the context should also be taken into account: finding the same language takes time (No. 4); it is challenging to map an informal community (No. 2); and it takes time to understand the context (No. 7).

Funding is another frequently faced challenge, with many interviewees mentioning the lack of suitable budget options (No. 2, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 13 14, 16, 17, 18). Some highlighted the imbalance between workload and salaries (No. 11, 18), while others pointed out the high costs of travel and limitations imposed by funding restrictions (No. 5). Unreliable and unstructured funding also negatively impacts the sustainability and longevity of projects (No. 2, 10, 13).

Maintaining project sustainability for long-term effects is also challenging. Students leave when the course is over, while the project may still require infrastructure, work, and resources. In addition, most student projects need further development in order to exceed the characteristics of a showcase project and be viable in the real world. This might frustrate the stakeholders of the project. As Interviewee No. 15 expressed, the scope and possibilities must be seen clearly at the outset of the project. The idea is to create real collaborations with the people who live in the community, to create the conditions to plant these small seeds, hoping that some of them may sprout.

Alongside the technical challenges, working with diverse participants and communities also presents significant difficulties. Many interviewees experienced unrealistic expectations due to the lack of open communication, sometimes leading to pessimism about the project's outcomes (7, 17). There is also a gap in sharing skills and knowledge, which often results from a lack of experience or from the loss of information among too many participants (No. 11). As an interviewee stated, once the tasks are distributed, there is a risk that the information is not collected well (No. 10).

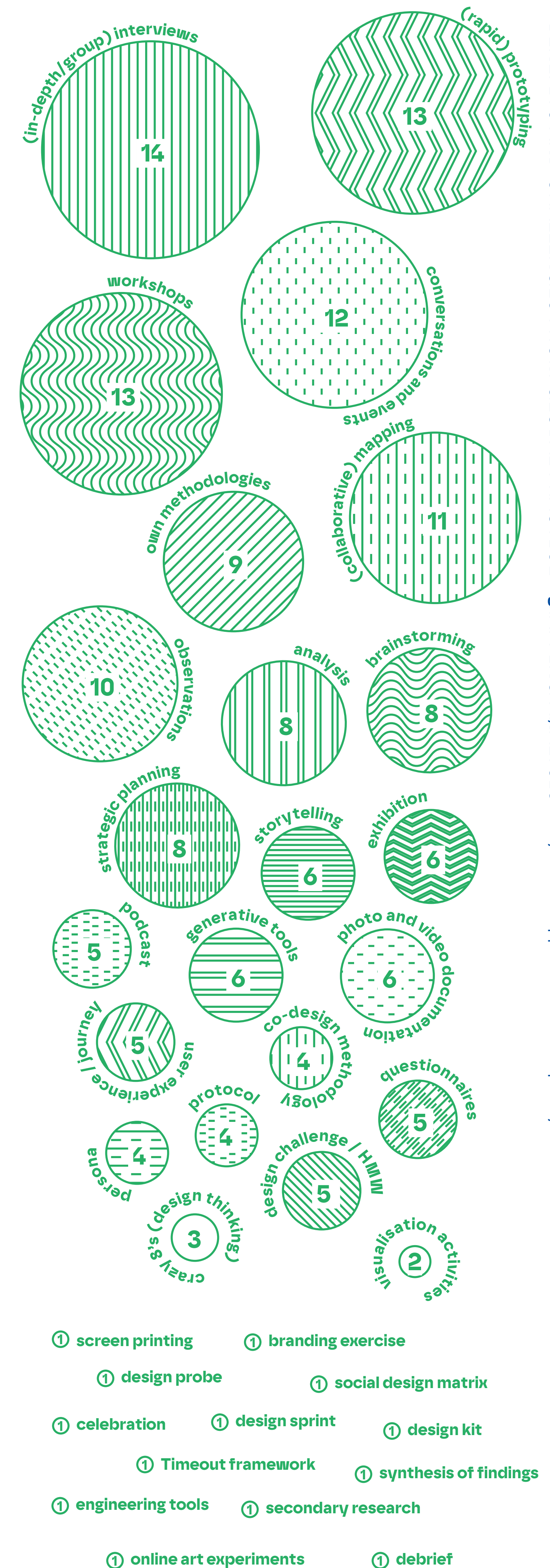


Figure 3. Diversity of tools applied and the frequency of their use

Interviewees also articulated the significant emotional and practical challenges while working with vulnerable groups, which call for specialised support. Interviewee No. 2 and No. 8 highlighted the importance of honest dialogue and interdisciplinary support to address issues related to class, race, gender, and culture. Gaining the trust of local groups, as mentioned by Interviewee No. 1, was critical. Trust was often facilitated by empowering the community leaders. Interviewee No. 10 noted that maintaining a consistent presence in the communities helps build trust and involvement. The involvement of psychologists in workshops and maintaining informal, accessible communication channels proved to be beneficial in managing the emotional burdens inherent in these projects. Despite these efforts, the emotional toll on researchers remains a persistent challenge.

... the significant emotional and practical challenges while working with vulnerable groups

Lastly, several interviewees (No. 1, 2, 7, 10, 13, 15) articulated the inherent challenges of social and collaborative design itself. Co-design takes time (No. 2, 7) and can be messy (2, 15) which might lead to uncertainty (No. 2). This highlights that finding the appropriate scale of the project is crucial (No. 10).

2.4 Opportunities and Benefits of Interinstitutional Participatory Projects

Aside from the numerous challenges social designers faced when entering the educational settings, many opportunities still emerged from the perspectives of both HEIs and NGOs. Several clear-cut benefits of the interinstitutional projects surfaced in the interviews.

First, the focus on an in-depth process of learning and understanding new perspectives were essential aspects (No. 1, 2, 3, 6, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 17, 18, 19). This included the acquisition of new ideas, the improved understanding of a complex problem, and also the exchange of knowledge (interviewees routinely touching on both academic aspects of social issues and discussions connected to learning).

Second, significant academic and educational benefits were articulated. By involving students to work *"within the context of a real brief, [...] with real actors and a real community"* (No. 2) and by exposing them to resource limitations (No. 2, 8), students experienced personal growth, transformed perspectives, new skills (No. 12), as well as the process of dealing with a problem (No. 8, 12). They could appreciate the 'potential of design' (No. 8) in these situations. This hands-on experience helped bridge the gap between academic learning and practical application, fostering a deeper understanding of the complexity of social challenges. It also nurtured a sense of social responsibility in students, inspiring them to continue contributing to similar challenges in other local or global contexts.

Third, collaborative projects were vital in overcoming challenges through resource-sharing, multidisciplinary collaboration, and engagement with real-world issues (No. 1, 8, 13, 14, 17).

Fourth, community engagement fostered participatory processes, empowered communities, ensured informed decision-making, and addressed local needs (No. 3, 9, 10, 19). Finally, the dialogue with various stakeholders enabled the exchange of insights and co-design processes, resulting in more meaningful solutions, being responsive to community needs, and encouraging participatory processes. Other benefits included better outcomes through co-creation or restructuring, dissemination of the acquired knowledge, and diversity.

The challenge lies in the opportunity that these interinstitutional projects go beyond traditional teaching methods by immersing students in the dynamic and unpredictable nature of social challenges. Developing a structured syllabus for the course in this mode of operation requires flexibility and creative thinking. However, it is possible to overcome this obstacle and establish a learning experience that enhances student learning:

"From a pedagogical point of view, it's teaching students within a context of a real brief, with accountability. Suddenly they're working with real actors and a real community, and they see the limited resources. It's pretty amazing what comes out of that. It's often in a different discipline than they are normally working in." (No. 2)

Unreliable and unstructured funding also negatively impacts the sustainability and longevity of projects

Naturally, the NGOs and local communities benefit from these collaborations as well, particularly through gaining capacity and resources (No. 1, 8, 17), which can have positive effects on local communities (No. 9), fostering societal learning and improving local infrastructure (No. 10), and encouraging positive community engagement through hospitality and the local sourcing of food (No. 15):

"It changes everything because they [academia] have resources, and we can count on them. They can help us develop prototypes. Incorporate these labs in other universities for collaboration with other disciplines. At the university you always work with your group of friends, you don't even work with other people, and it allows us to bring in those key stakeholders you must have. It shows what happens if we collaborate with stakeholders you would never think of. So I think that this kind of mix is the value of design: in these collaborations new dialogues are going to emerge." (No. 1)

Collaborating with NGOs also benefits HEIs and their staff members. Interviewee No. 16 explained that *"Personally I felt that I learned tonnes and tonnes and tonnes from these NGOs perhaps because they function outside of the expectations of academia."* Other interviewees noted that *"It's a beautiful journey for academics, to work in areas where they can really make a difference"* (No. 16), and added:

"So the NGOs were really good at transferring skills, helping universities with this video making and giving advice. That was so practical and hands-on — they could do [everything] from bookmaking to [even making] a fantastic video. And they were very generous in sharing these practical skills. So I just felt that we were really equal partners." (No. 16)

The challenge lies in the opportunity that these interinstitutional projects go beyond traditional teaching methods by immersing students in the dynamic and unpredictable nature of social challenges.

2.5 Looking Ahead

When considering future collaborations, interviewees mentioned the need for a deeper understanding of the information gaps and social gaps that exist between the participants. In addition, they emphasised the importance and impact of interventions and dedicated small-scale actions, and advocated lowering expectations regarding the scope of change, cautioning against attempts to transform reality entirely.

Key recommendations for improving collaboration focused on prioritising appropriate group size, extending the timeframe of the course, and, most importantly, aligning expectations before launching the process. The interviewees encouraged focusing on new approaches, new ways, re-engaging participants, and looking for new opportunities. As stated by Interviewee No. 1, it is essential to *"not insist on the traditional way."*

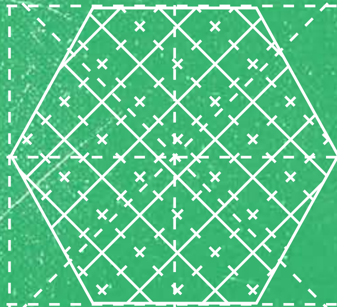
Practical suggestions offered by interviewees included expanding existing collaborations or improving the current situation by developing MOOCs on social challenges (No. 16), creating podcasts to make design research accessible, and providing seminars, meetings, and gatherings (No. 3) in order to empower students to actively engage with their city (No. 8), to create horizontal spaces for transparent knowledge exchange (No. 15), or to establish FabLabs with municipal funding (No. 14). Each of these emphasise both the expansion of knowledge and participation, while also deepening and encouraging knowledge exchange.

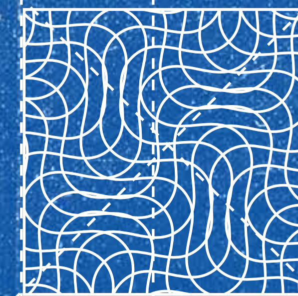
In the context of collaboration between academia and NGOs, interviewees generally identified the importance of a non-hierarchical, balanced partnership, where both parties contributed equally in their respective domains. Interviewee No. 16 highlighted that NGOs brought practical design and project management skills, while academia contributed with research expertise. However, Interviewee No. 1 noted occasional competition and hesitancy from NGOs to share information, driven by perceived agendas and competitive dynamics. Nonetheless, academia's role was often seen as more influential in the creative process, with professors and researchers showing a strong commitment to solution development. As Interviewee No. 3 pointed out, funding dynamics also played a significant role, necessitating negotiations to balance academic objectives with practical activities.

Decision-making processes within these partnerships were generally collective and iterative. According to Interviewee No. 9, these processes were typically defined in collaborative meetings, where roles and responsibilities were assigned based on participants' willingness and expertise. Interviewee No. 10 emphasised that roles could evolve over time, therefore documenting these changes is necessary in order to follow the development of group dynamics. Interviewee No. 1 described a consensus-driven approach involving various stakeholders, where leadership often emerged from academia and the public sector to ensure project continuity and resource allocation. Interviewee No. 15 and Interviewee No. 16 also noted the importance of transparent assemblies and workshops for inclusive decision-making, although fluctuations in institutional participation posed occasional challenges.

PART 01

Examples from the Field: Case Study Analysis





03

3. Examples from the Field: Case Study Analysis

In pursuit of advancing collaborative practices between HEIs and NGOs within the domain of social design, we initiated and realised two pilot projects in different countries: one led by the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano (unibz) in Italy (Pilot A), and another by the Berlin University of the Arts (UdK) in Germany (Pilot B). Conducted in different cultural settings, both pilots served as dynamic opportunities for experimentation and learning, enabling participants (including academic and civil society representatives, students, and community members) to navigate the intricacies of interinstitutional collaboration.

The pilot projects aimed to co-create knowledge and provide good practices while fostering enduring partnerships. Throughout the process, insights were systematically gathered, analysed, and refined. By examining and documenting the process, the challenges, and the outcomes, the study aimed to distil actionable insights that could inform future social design initiatives. These insights encompassed various dimensions, such as the dynamics of power and resource distribution among collaborators, the critical role of language and cultural translation in facilitating effective communication, and strategies for sustaining long-term collaborative efforts.

Ultimately, the findings from these pilot projects are intended to serve as a foundation for advancing more robust and impactful collaborations between academia and social organisations, thereby catalysing positive social change and sustainable development on a global scale.

The overarching goal of these pilots extends beyond immediate project outcomes. The emphasis is on the development of replicable models and frameworks that could be adapted and applied across different socio-cultural contexts. By leveraging the experiences and lessons gleaned from these initiatives, the study aimed to contribute to the broader discourse on collaborative approaches to social design, advocating for methodologies that prioritise equity, inclusivity, and community-driven innovation. Ultimately, the findings from these pilot projects are intended to serve as a foundation for advancing more robust and impactful collaborations between academia and social organisations, thereby catalysing positive social change and sustainable development on a global scale.

3.1 Pilot A: Bolzano, Italy

3.1.1 Context, Aims, and Results of the Collaboration

The first case study is a semester-long project within the MA Programme in Eco-Social Design at unibz, Bolzano. It introduces students to design projects that promote eco-social transformations locally. Partnering with **OfficineVispa (OV)**, a social cooperative in Bolzano, the collaboration focuses on peripheral neighbourhoods with a high presence of social housing, particularly in the Don Bosco district. OV develops and manages several community spaces and projects rooted in Bolzano. Its interventions vary in style and approaches, offering aggregative and formative activities to the population, as well as physical, relational, and collaborative contexts and spaces for self-organised, spontaneous, and informal use. OV aims to foster civic engagement, create community bonds, and improve territorial connections. It intends to encourage public participation and enhance the value and meaning of urban spaces as shared community assets. These objectives are connected to the reduction of vulnerability, decreasing the risk of solitude, isolation, and negligence, and addressing issues of community responsibility for their living environments. OV serves residents of all ages in the neighbourhoods where it operates, with particular attention to vulnerable groups. OV's activities are carried out by approximately ten employees and several volunteers. Among other activities, they offer a community cooking group, a community bicycle workshop, a tailoring workshop, and after-school activities.

The collaboration between OV and the MA programme began around 2018, originating from the BA programme in Design, where students involved OV in the development of a semester design project. This experience, among other reasons, later encouraged OV to involve MA students studying eco-social design in a publicly funded project focusing on public space innovation as part of a semester design project. This interinstitutional collaboration continued for several years, extending beyond semester projects to include additional research and thesis works.

The pilot project at unibz was centred around a semester-long project during the Winter Semester of 2023/2024. Organised in collaboration with OV, the pilot supported students to learn how to develop community-based design projects that tackle community needs and eco-social challenges. Students and teachers collaborated with OV to engage the neighbourhood's stakeholders, citizens, and public administrators. Through close interactions, students selected a topic in collaboration with the local community and developed a situated project aiming at modest local eco-social transformation. Recognising that meaningful change takes time, students were encouraged to build on outcomes gathered in previous academic years.

... the pilot supported students to learn how to develop community-based design projects that tackle community needs and eco-social challenges.

The pilot involved 25 first-year MA students coming from all over the world including Europe, Turkey, the USA, Tunisia, the UK, Iran, and South America. They represented diverse disciplinary backgrounds such as product design, graphic design, social sciences, and activism. Five professors and lecturers from the fields of Design, Design Research, Objects–Spaces–Services, and Communication–Interaction–Services also participated. Additionally, the project involved four operators of OfficineVispa representing the fields of cultural and community development (one of whom is an alumnus of the Faculty of Design and Art at unibz) and six community members (other operators, volunteers, and educators).

The result of this collaboration was a multi-phase collaborative effort involving situational learning, the co-creation of eco-social design projects, and the continuation of the partnership beyond the semester. Students developed projects in partnership with local actors, overcoming initial challenges like complex reflection tools and limited direct contact. The collaboration led to the creation of prototypes and design materials, some of which were integrated into local practices, demonstrating the potential for long-term impact and ongoing partnership between academia and community organisations.

3.1.2 Motivations and Challenges

The core motivations for collaboration remained consistent across stakeholders despite changes in interinstitutional arrangements and formats over time. OV's main motivations included:

(1) the interest in a creative approach for engaging in social transformation on the ground;

(2) the recognition gained from partnering with universities;

(3) new beneficial insights derived from design processes; and

(4) an increasing orientation towards social innovation.

From an educational perspective, the collaboration was driven by a commitment to interdisciplinary, transformative, and collaborative teaching:

(1) helping students from diverse backgrounds adapt to new contexts and community-based design approaches; and

(2) facilitating fieldwork and situated design projects.

The shared interest in interdisciplinary support for social change was the overarching motivation, while geographical proximity between the university and the social cooperative provided an additional practical benefit.

The main challenges were primarily related to the involvement of different participating actors (students, community members, educators, and OV operators) in the collaborative design process and in reflecting on that process. For the students, the initial diary tool provided to document their experience of interinstitutional collaboration proved to be too complex. Many were overwhelmed by their first semester, and their unfamiliarity with design research led to poor note-taking. Consequently, only a limited number of diaries were completed, most of which lacked depth and informativeness, highlighting the need

EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD: CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

for adjustments to better align with students' intellectual, emotional, and practical needs and skills. In addition, involving students in reflecting on their experience of collaboration required special attention to research ethics, particularly because their professors were also researchers.

While the pilot was integrated in the students' educational programme, sharing reflections on the collaboration was completely voluntary. A few students chose not to participate, which led to their data being removed from the study. The rather autonomous nature of the students' co-creation phase resulted in limited direct contact with some of the community actors involved in the pilot, making it difficult to capture their experiences about the collaboration. Nevertheless, with the help of OV and the professors, several community actors were involved in interviews and a participatory workshop.

A change in the team managing the semester project introduced challenges in transferring knowledge and practices, despite efforts to ease the transition. Furthermore, compared to previous years, OV had less time to facilitate students' engagement and interactions with the neighbourhood and its local actors — a role that is particularly demanding. As a result, OV organised a 'Partner Forum' to streamline networking and reduce workload. The absence of a formal agreement between the university and OV seemed to contribute to the decline in energy levels. While the informal HEI–NGO relationship supported "spontaneity, speed, rapidity", formalisation could *"actually make even more tangible the idea of being in a more horizontal collaboration"* (OV operator). Finally, managing power dynamics between students and local actors was crucial: one instance of miscommunication led to friction, highlighting the importance of reciprocity in these interactions.

3.1.3 Pilot A: Overall Process and Implemented Research Tools

The pilot centred on a semester-long educational framework within the MA programme in Eco-Social Design at unibz. Preparatory research was carried out in advance to plan the pilot, including (1) the analysis of previous years' student projects and (2) semi-structured interviews with the main initiators of the collaboration. The research activities unveiled the strengths and limits of the previous years' collaborations, and informed the definition of several existing formats and main phases for collaboration, which became the milestones of the pilot. The activities were based on a "thick documentation" approach, which in participatory design is used to map subjective perspectives in complex participatory projects. This approach is intended to support generativity, ensuring the ability to sustain collaboration (Schoffelen & Huybrechts, 2015).

The pilot was structured around three main phases: (1) Situating Collaboration, (2) Co-creating, and (3) Sustaining Collaboration. The three phases focused on different aims, partly different but sometimes overlapping research tools, and collaborative design methods.

(1) **The 'Situating Collaboration' phase was explored through participant observations, interviews with NGO partners and teachers, and a participatory workshop with students.** In the interviews, professors and OV described the phase's features, challenges, and learning outcomes. Observations were based on a canvas developed by the researchers and focused on established formats for collaboration. Meanwhile the workshop engaged students in context mapping, utilising canvases and labels.

The fieldwork revealed that the 'Situating Collaboration' phase is an exploratory stage where students learn about the neighbourhood and its local actors, and vice versa. By learning alongside non-academic participants, students discover their new role as designers within the context of eco-social transformations. This phase helps students develop an understanding of community-based design practices and ground their work in real-life contexts. OV suggested that for mutual learning to be more effective, this phase should begin earlier and be more fully integrated into the semester's planning. By engaging in this process, students were able to identify topics and design opportunities, which culminated in the presentation of their neighbourhood-inspired design briefs. By midterm, most student groups demonstrated some level of local actor involvement in their projects.

(2) **The 'Co-creating' phase was identified as evolving from the students' definition of an initial project brief (at around mid-term) into the delivery of a prototype.** This phase, which involved collaboration between students, OV operators, and local actors in an effort to develop eco-social design projects, was explored through interviewing teachers, OV operators, and students. The interviews with teachers and OV operators focused on co-creation experiences, exploring features, challenges, overall lessons learned, and power dynamics. Later, students conducted 'bilateral interviews' based on a framework prepared by the researchers, which allowed them to reflect on their design processes. They appreciated the format, as it gave them the chance to sit together and think through their experiences. Some of the co-creation sessions were also observed by the researchers.

The pilot revealed that multiple forms of collaboration emerged within the design projects. While some projects followed a true co-design process, involving mutual learning and continuous negotiation, others were more deeply contextualized within the community, drawing inspiration from the situations and people the students encountered, as well as from the needs and opportunities they identified. Only one project consistently adhered to a co-design approach. As explained by the students, this was made possible by their decision to step back from their role as designers and adopt ethnographic approaches to deeply understand the practices of the actors, and simultaneously introduce their design capacities and interests to their partners. This co-creation process was also strengthened by ongoing negotiations, as students and partners worked to align their interests. It followed an iterative approach, with prototypes being tested multiple times in real-world settings. Inspired by community themes, other projects engaged local organisations such as schools. Some focused on content development like storytelling through documentaries and magazines, while others experimented with neighbourhood spaces, or adapted existing local projects like a community radio initiative.

(3) **The 'Sustaining Collaboration' phase focused on ensuring the continuity of the semester project's outcomes and promoting ongoing interinstitutional collaboration after the semester ended.** It required reflections on what could be envisioned or planned to sustain the collaboration and its outcomes in the long term. Participant observations were conducted during the Gäste Ospiti Guests Semester Show, the final exam, and the 'Review and Preview' feedback session. Researchers organised a participatory workshop titled 'Looking Back and Moving Forward' for the detailed workshop format, (see 5.5.6 'Looking Back and Moving Forward' Workshop on page 80), using an illustrated timeline to map key turning points and envision future developments, incorporating feedback from students, teachers, OV operators, and local partners. It resulted in a timeline highlighting collaboration experiences, subjective perspectives, and potential improvements. The timeline was further enriched with comments from community actors gathered through informal conversations. It became clear that future project developments often envisioned how prototypes could evolve locally. One prototype was successfully integrated into a local partner's practice and reached other similar actors citywide and regionwide due to its co-design approach and real-life testing. Several other partners also recognised the potential to integrate the design materials they received into their future practices.

3.2 Pilot B: Berlin, Germany

3.2.1 Context, Aims, and Results of the Collaboration

Pilot B was carried out by the Berlin University of the Arts (UdK) involving researchers, designers, and educators in collaboration with three partner organisations. The main partner, the **Democratic Society** (DemSoc, https://www.demsoc.org/), is a European NGO with its headquarters in Brussels that promotes democratic engagement and participation, working to create spaces where citizens can actively influence decision-making processes in their communities. **The Pestalozzi-Fröbel Haus** (PFH, https://www.pfh-berlin.de/en) is a Berlin-based community centre dedicated to early childhood education and social services, providing support and developmental opportunities for children and families to foster well-being and educational growth. **CityLAB Berlin** is an innovation hub focused on leveraging technology and open data to enhance urban living and address the complex challenges faced by cities today.

One of the main goals of Pilot B was to gain empirical knowledge from a community-led approach about 1) participation, democratic engagement, and digital inequality; as well as 2) specific challenges of bridging the academic sector and the NGO ecosystem. Additionally, the pilot aimed to provide support for the methodological recommendations linked to the project's main outcomes.

As a qualitative approach for participatory collaborations between academic/higher educational sectors, civic initiatives, and NGOs, the pilot experimented with different discursive and participatory formats. The UdK team's goal was to establish a collaboration that prioritises community needs over the university's project requirements. Against this backdrop, several key events and initiatives took place, including two workshops on

open data and digital learning with urban communities (involving neighbourhood coordinators and community organisers), a public event with project presentations and a panel discussion, a workshop with students, and six podcast episodes with representatives from academia and civil society. Within its experimental formats, Pilot B aimed to encourage inclusion between different sectors and actors by setting examples and structuring the knowledge generated on how to establish and sustain collaborations that serve the needs of diverse communities. The spaces created during the pilot were designed as critical learning environments that go beyond traditional, institutionalized educational settings and aim to foster new forms of engagement, encouraging knowledge exchange on an equal footing and connecting diverse sources of expertise. The outcome of this practice was a multi-stage collaborative process that included situational and community-based learning. The pilot provided situated knowledge about:

... critical learning environments that go beyond traditional, institutionalized educational settings...

- What kinds of alliances have to be built to sustain collaboration around the topic of critical digital literacy?
- How do we build common grounds?
- What content emerges out of the collaboration?
- How is power negotiated within these relationships? How are power relations made visible, negotiated, mediated, and transgressed?

At the core of the workshops with urban actors was the collaborative development of applications for using open data in the public interest. The broader discussions revolved around ethics and design, and power relations within academia-NGO collaborations. One main result was the facilitation and promotion of public and democratic negotiation on these issues. The pilot provided new spaces for collective learning in the areas of digital political education and critical digital literacy. Students, researchers, local communities, activists, and community organisers were showcasing the possibilities for collaboration between academic institutions (such as the design department), European players (like DemSoc) and local organisations (PFH and City Lab).

3.2.2 Motivation and Challenges

Pilot B was driven by two key factors: a shared interest in social design and digital justice — particularly the democratization of digital transformation — and close collaborations between the design department of UdK and its NGO partner, focusing on digital literacy and sovereignty. The UdK team leveraged their personal experiences to navigate the initial stages of establishing a formal partnership with DemSoc (Democratic Society), overcoming challenges related to work dynamics, mutual understanding, and shared goals. Building trust through formal and informal interactions was crucial, highlighting the importance of long-term relationships. The pilot involved gathering urban community perspectives and conducting various workshops to install a sense of responsibility and ethics in students regarding social design projects. Public events like "In Conversation" aimed to share experiences and inspire societal actors, while the final workshop sought to establish future collaborations beyond the "Change Agents" project, aiming to create long-term commitment.

Throughout the collaboration, the main challenges included synchronising activities with both the urban community and the neighbourhood centre (Pestalozzi-Fröbel Haus, PFH), as well as effectively communicating the benefits of participation to time-constrained community representatives. The pilot's design had to remain flexible to accommodate time constraints and allow constructive feedback. Civil society organisations' need for concrete results often clashed with the open-ended, process-oriented, and slower pace of academic research. As such, building sustainable partnerships for long-term impact are difficult within short-term academic constraints. This underscores the importance of clear communication, mutual understanding, flexibility, and adaptability. Issues of time and power dynamics were also highlighted as significant obstacles. Involving individuals who had experience in both academia and activism was identified as a key strategy for bridging gaps and fostering mutual understanding.

Need for concrete results often clashed with the open-ended, process-oriented, and slower pace of academic research

3.2.3 Pilot B: Overall Process and Implemented Research Tools

The methodologies used to develop the workshops encompassed a blend of participatory approaches, qualitative research methods, and community engagement strategies. One of the primary approaches in the workshops was to engage not as a leader, but as an observer and participant: immersing oneself in the community, relinquishing control, and trusting the community's dynamics as a caring and attentive partner. The aim was to foster open dialogue, encourage knowledge exchange, and transmit the voices of the community.

The workshops — which focused on critical digital learning and making technology accessible and beneficial — served as a space for collaborative exploration where participants shared their experiences, insights, and aspirations. NGOs do not usually have the time for exploration, and this project offered a space for reflection. To maintain Pilot B's integrity and relevance to the community, DemSoc adopted a certain participatory approach and a particularly candid communication style. The NGO representatives played a key role in documenting and synthesizing project progress, which ensured both transparency and accountability. The methods used in the UdK pilot during different events included the following:

(1) A workshop was conducted with DemSoc and the urban community at Stadtteilkoordination Schöneberg Nord (the District Coordination Bureau of Schöneberg Nord) involving 12 participants. The focus was on assessing the community centre's interest in utilising open data, applying open neighbourhood data, and discussing critical data literacy. Participants reflected on the potential benefits of public data, such as improving quality of life and understanding civil rights. The workshop emphasised the necessity of data transparency and technical know-how for effective community advocacy addressing issues ranging from healthcare to public administration.

(2) The second workshop was conducted by ELISAVA and involved 11 HBK Braunschweig students. The workshop prepared students for community and NGO projects by discussing ethical considerations, responsible decision-making, and societal impacts of design. It emphasised the role of designers in addressing issues like accessibility, sustainability, and social justice. The primary goals of the workshop were to cultivate a collaborative and socially responsible mindset among students by connecting theoretical knowledge with real-world challenges, and to generate questions for the panel discussion at the upcoming public event.

(3) A public event was organised with project presentations and a panel discussion at Berlin Open Lab/UdK Berlin. It focused on exploring and establishing long-lasting collaborations that meet the real needs of the communities through design. Presentations by societal actors and academic representatives addressed how social designers should approach NGOs, build trust, and reduce complexity in collaborations. The event emphasised the importance of 'bridge institutions' and immersive experiences to build trust, recognising academia's limitations in solving complex social problems. It called for more inclusive and collaborative approaches, highlighting the role of designers in driving social change and embedding influencing values.

(4) The public event was followed by **a workshop with civil society representatives**, focusing on using data for infrastructure development and democratic processes. The event included 15 participants from various organisations, including Stadtteilkoordination Schöneberg Nord, Kiezoase in Schöneberg, Nachbarschaftszentrum Kiezoase, Familienzentrum an Grundschule Otto-Wels Grundschule in Kreuzberg, Nachbarschaftszentrum Bornhagenweg in Lichtenrade, Familienzentrum Kastanienallee in Charlottenburg, CityLAB Berlin, the Pestalozzi-Fröbel Haus, and the Democratic Society. Participants aimed to develop at least one pilot idea while exploring how organisations could support each other in the usage and creation of data. The discussion highlighted the need for systematic data organisation and the careful handling of sensitive data. Participants reflected on the role of HEIs in supporting project development and data usage. The workshop underscored the importance of systematic, well-structured collaborations between NGOs and HEIs, recognising the challenges posed by time constraints and the rapid turnover of students.

(5) Another unique addition was the **six-episode podcast series titled "Change to Go"**, which featured diverse geographical perspectives and collaborative practices in social design. Each episode, hosted by different team members from the Change Agents project, provided fresh perspectives and facilitated organic, unscripted conversations. Topics included power dynamics between researchers and activists, creating safe learning spaces, and the role of design education as an agent of change. The podcast aimed to offer listeners new insights through interviews with practitioners, activists, and academics, using professional production standards to ensure broad reach and impact.

3.3 Insights and Patterns from Pilot A and Pilot B

Several key patterns emerged across both pilot projects when considered from a broader perspective: disparities in pacing and time limitations, the importance of establishing a common ground and maintaining continuous communication, mapping needs, and the careful coordination of expectations. Moreover, in most of the cases these insights are in line with the conclusions of the literature review (see Part 1) and the interview analysis (see Part 2).

Insight 1. Laying Foundations: Fostering Early Immersion and Building Local Ties

Both pilots emphasised the importance of starting the collaboration by establishing a connection with the project's real-world contexts and the involved community. Implementing an 'immersive' period (organised or self-guided walks, presentations by local actors, etc.), and early introduction of ethnographic approaches, can help students to better understand the community and its context. Starting collaborations by gathering perspectives from the involved urban community, and then inviting different social actors to share their work and experiences, can help prevent future misunderstandings regarding roles and expectations.

In Bolzano (Pilot A), the partner organisation, OfficineVispa (OV) got the role of a 'networking hub'. As a student shared: *"it was hard trying to get into the community of Don Bosco because I already felt a bit lost upon arriving in Bolzano [...]. So, I was happy when we met the team of la Rotonda [OV] and they introduced us to their contacts."* This feeling of being lost also aligns with OV's description of the students as "aliens". Since their first arrival, students lacked roots in the community, and without proper facilitation and tools, there was a risk of extractive attitudes towards the community. OV helped *"to protect and take care of the relationships in order to avoid creating false expectations"* (OV operator). During the feedback sessions, some students expressed the desire for more time to spend in the neighbourhood and engage with residents.

Insight 2. Curating Engagement of Academia with Partners and Communities by Addressing Power Dynamics and Preparing Students for Respectful Engagement

Both pilots highlighted the importance of addressing power dynamics between higher education institutions (HEIs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), as well as the need for meaningful community engagement. Effective collaboration between HEIs, NGOs, and community actors requires thorough internal reflection on available resources, organisational structures, and the time commitment required, along with planning for necessary internal arrangements. Also, both pilots raised ethical considerations, emphasising the importance of careful and respectful engagement in eco-social transformation projects. Students must be prepared for transparent communication with local actors, and encouraged to be aware of their role and position when entering the community.

In Pilot A, after the meeting between students and local actors, several partners needed to be *"convinced" as to why their "labour and resources should be invested"*, while others appreciated the fresh perspectives brought by the "creative minds". OV played a key role in fostering trust and commitment to the process. They recommended an extended 'Situating Collaboration' phase to better prepare partners ahead of the semester.

While the pilot in Berlin was not a traditional educational project, the need for curating data and experiences was relevant and clear. Engaging NGOs through information sharing and co-managing the pilot proved to be extremely helpful. Recognising and respecting the norms and values of each entity while finding common ground was also crucial. Both formal meetings and informal interactions helped build trust between new team members and local partners.

Insight 3. Using Clear Language and Transparent Communication to Define Roles, Manage Expectations, and Address Potential Barriers

Transparent communication includes the clear definition of roles, tasks, and partner expectations, while also recognising each partner's time availability and constraints. It is necessary to navigate different work cultures and fields of knowledge, as well as to identify potential barriers such as language or disabilities, and develop strategies to address them.

In Pilot A, the international students of the Eco-Social Design MA English programme initially found language to be a barrier to community engagement. Students tried to overcome this by forming project groups with Italian speakers and utilising non-verbal formats like maps. Nevertheless, the interviewed local actors did not see language as a barrier. OV emphasised the need for students and academia to clearly translate eco-social design topics (e.g., social justice and climate change) to the community to prevent the projects from becoming overly theoretical. Additionally, partners' practices and interests needed translation for students to enhance collaboration. According to one OV operator, some partners' limited communication skills might have negatively influenced student interest in working with them.

At some level, participants of the pilot in Berlin also faced these issues due to the international background of many UdK students. However, local student participation and the international nature of DemSoc made this potential obstacle less significant. Despite efforts to prevent an oppressive atmosphere, miscommunication still arose due to unclear responsibilities and expectations. The researchers of UdK also highlighted communication gaps regarding the different roles and expectations among the collaborating actors at the beginning of the pilot.

Insight 4. Collaborating with Local Partners Besides HEIs and NGOs

Interinstitutional collaborations include not only HEIs and NGOs, but also local third sector organisations brought in by the partners. However, involving local third sector organisations adds complexity, as they may compete for funding and share overlapping themes (e.g. social innovation or community and urban development). This highlights the importance of paying careful attention to interactions between these organisations in such projects. Despite the challenges, local actors can see these collaborations as valuable opportunities to learn about other organisations and build new relationships.

In Bolzano, the Partner Forum was a tested format for an initial meeting of students and local actors, and it successfully facilitated introductions and networking, although the invited actors highlighted the requirement for additional preparation to properly engage with students and to participate in the interinstitutional collaboration.

In Pilot B, the UdK team used their personal experiences to navigate the first steps of establishing a formal collaboration. Initial challenges included creating a working dynamic based on trust and communication between academia and local social organisations.

Insight 5. Supporting Community Participation by a Variety of Activities

While community participation during the co-creation process cannot be guaranteed, offering a diverse range of optional activities might motivate engagement on a shorter or longer term. Local festivals and markets as well as organised lectures, workshops, and podcast interviews can offer a platform for encounters.

In Pilot A, students struggled to motivate local actors and community members. This was often due either to scheduling conflicts (a misalignment between academic schedules and everyday routines) or the complexity of their projects. To address this, some students of unibz presented their ideas at neighbourhood events, which helped them connect with the community. However, a professor emphasised that given the time constraints, students should understand the limited depth of community commitment they can expect.

In Pilot B, UdK addressed the potential challenge of participation by devising a range of activities, offering various types of involvement for different stakeholders. Thus, while students found the podcast format more engaging and interesting, NGOs and community members benefited more from community workshops.

Insight 6. Curating the Transition between Situating and Co-creating by Careful Coordination, Facilitation, and Ongoing Monitoring

Both pilots highlighted the need for better organisation and facilitation during the transition from the situating phase to the co-creation phase. Since this transition is challenging, it requires further moderation to support exchange and learning through meetings, reflections, and monitoring.

In Pilot A, the first phase was planned by professors and OV, while the second phase was more autonomous, with students engaging directly with the community and the partners. OV suggested adding a new role to support both students and partners and oversee the entire process. Professors also recommended more meetings with partners throughout the semester to monitor the progress of the collaboration.

The pilot in Berlin offered a similar understanding, revealing that mapping out the specific topics and needs of the participants and partners involved at the outset or even before starting a collaboration proved productive to identify courses of action and distribute tasks. This allowed students to provide fruitful ways to tackle the respective issues. These activities had a positive impact, but required careful management and coordination to meet the needs of all the different stakeholders.

Insight 7. Integrating Pedagogical and Community Needs by Flexible Adaptation

Both pilots emphasised the challenges of balancing pedagogical and community needs in inter-institutional collaboration. Beyond academic expertise, professors regard these collaborations as essential for cultivating the diverse skills required for eco-social transformations. While the benefits of these projects for the community are still unclear, local actors valued the social aspects and expressed a desire for concrete neighbourhood transformations over time. They also noted that collaboration can help NGOs gain visibility and attract more volunteers. Both pilots emphasised the importance of flexibility to adapt to this aspect of the collaboration.

A professor of unibz highlighted the need for practical skills from NGOs and city workers to avoid becoming too theoretical and conceptual with no connection to reality. However, OV expressed concerns that the collaboration often aligns more with academic needs, requiring significant energy from NGOs without proportional benefits. Additionally, the timeframe of the academic semester often forces projects to move too quickly toward prototypes, which may not always be the best outcome for NGOs or the communities they work with. Both OV and professors at unibz recommended considering alternative outcomes, such as research projects or small-scale interventions, to avoid producing numerous, less impactful prototypes.

In Berlin, the collaboration addressed similar challenges by organising the first workshop with UdK and its partner NGOs in a manner facilitating open and dynamic discussion. The workshop focused on mapping local resources, accessibility, and know-how, as well as exploring residents' perceptions and the needs of the community.

Insight 8. Developing a Long-term, Sustainable Collaboration through Regular Reflection, Mixed Research Methods, and Proper Documentation

When the collaboration extends over the long-term, curating the engagement between HEI, NGO, and community players also involves supporting continuity in relationships and outcomes over the years. Both pilot projects illustrated that long-term sustainability is only possible by sharing the project outcomes with partners, which ensures that the community benefits and that the knowledge acquired can be applied in other contexts as well. Also, employing mixed research methods — including interviews, group discussions, observations, participatory techniques, and surveys — provides a comprehensive evaluation framework.

In Pilot A, a neighbourhood exhibition organised as part of the Salotto Don Bosco at the beginning of the semester allowed previous unibz students to present their work to the community and to new students, helping to establish a sense of continuity. However, the professors at unibz emphasised the need for more systematic tools to archive and build on past projects, ensuring the collaboration's cumulative impact.

In Pilot B, regular reflection on principles of equity, inclusiveness, and ethics in practice also seemed essential, as well as considering the diversity and composition of the core team and the extended circle of co-researchers. Regular reflection and self-evaluation sessions should be implemented to develop clear indicators (see 5.5.5 'Consistent and Regular Reflection' Workshop on page 80).

3.4 Key Takeaways

This chapter introduced two pilot projects aimed at fostering collaboration between HEIs, NGOs, and community members in the realm of social design practice. One was conducted in Bolzano, Italy by the team of unibz, and the other took place in Berlin, Germany, conducted by UdK. Both cases illustrated the multifaceted nature of collaborative social design projects, emphasising the need for empathetic engagement, thorough preparation, clear communication, and sustained efforts for long-term impact and mutual benefit. The eight concluding insights emphasise the critical importance of establishing initial connections with local communities and territories to foster that empathetic engagement. They highlight the necessity of addressing power dynamics and facilitating mutual understanding and engagement among students, partners, and communities. In both pilots, the key challenges that emerged included community participation, the transition between the situating and co-creating phases, and balancing pedagogical goals with practical community needs.

Summary of Part 1

Drawing on the literature review, the interview analysis, and the case studies, we can identify the following challenges and insights inherent in social design partnerships between higher education and non-profit initiatives:

Challenges Arising from the Interinstitutional Nature of the Projects

(1) Divergent and unrealistic expectations among diverse participants can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts within the project. This issue often arises when participants have varying visions and goals that may not align with the project's objectives or the realities of its implementation.

(2) Changing participants' behaviours rooted in conflicting concerns and motivations poses a significant challenge. Participants may bring personal, professional, or cultural interests that diverge, making it difficult to foster cohesive collaboration and align everyone with the project's goals.

(3) The necessity for constant impact measurement and the thorough documentation of key insights requires ongoing effort and meticulous attention. This process is crucial for evaluating the project's success, identifying areas for improvement, and ensuring that the outcomes align with the intended objectives.

(4) Communication and dialogic issues often stem from differing language styles, such as the 'textbook approach' versus a 'real-world' perspective, which can create barriers to effective collaboration. These differences may lead to misunderstandings and hinder the exchange of ideas, making it difficult to achieve a unified direction.

(5) Complex decision-making processes are often blocked by a lack of mutual understanding of the community's needs, language barriers, unclear role definitions, power dynamics, and differing mentalities towards approaching the project. These factors can complicate the decision-making process, leading to delays and less than ideal outcomes.

(6) Sustaining and maintaining relationships built for long-term effect is critical for the success of ongoing and future projects. This requires continuous effort to nurture trust, communication, and collaboration among stakeholders to ensure lasting impact and mutual benefit.

Time-related Challenges

(1) Operational differences and conflicting schedules between academic and non-academic institutions can lead to coordination issues. Academic institutions follow structured academic calendars, while non-academic institutions may have more flexible schedules. These differences can make it challenging to plan and execute collaborative projects effectively.

(2) Methods and the outcomes dictated by time constraints can limit research or project scope. Tight deadlines may force the use of simplified methodologies and lead to less thorough results, affecting the overall quality and depth of the work.

Budget-related Challenges

(1) Extensive budget due to collective endeavour: Collaborative projects often require a substantial budget to cover the costs of bringing together multiple organizations and stakeholders. This includes funding for staff, resources, travel, and coordination efforts, which can significantly increase the project's overall financial demands.

(2) Lack of funding and suitable budget options: Securing adequate funding and finding appropriate budget options can be challenging for collaborative projects. Limited financial resources may hinder the ability to cover necessary expenses, leading to potential compromises in project scope, quality, and sustainability.

Stemming from the challenges and insights identified in Part 1, Part 2 is comprised of two chapters. Chapter 4 offers a list of practical recommendations, featuring detailed stories and raising questions about interinstitutional collaborations. These recommendations were developed through a careful review of empirical data, including interview notes, compiled quotes, completed questionnaires, and pilot reports. The recommendations were categorised based on the challenges identified during the mapping stage.

Following the practical recommendations outlined in Chapter 4, Part 2 introduces seven self-reflective workshop plans in Chapter 5. These formats aim to serve as conversational tools and models to better aid collective, respectful, and mutually beneficial discussions between NGOs and HEIs, as well as students and broader communities affected by the collaboration. Chapter 5 emphasises the importance of flexibility, dialogue, and the use of visual and sensory tools necessary to foster mutual understanding and promote shared goals between multiple actors.

These recommendations and tools are mainly developed to support the work of HEI educators and researchers focusing on social design and related fields in collaboration with NGOs. The secondary audience includes students, NGO representatives, and other key stakeholders who may participate in these interinstitutional partnerships.

Practical Recommendations to Enhance Collaboration between NGOs and Academia

04

4. Practical Recommendations to Enhance Collaboration between NGOs and Academia

This chapter introduces some methodological recommendations drawn from the literature review, the interview mapping, and the case study analysis presented in Part 1. Some of these compiled narratives offer ways to overcome obstacles, while others advocate for a 'staying with the trouble' mentality inspired by Donna Haraway (2016). These guidelines and proposals have been clustered into six thematic phases (Figure 4), each addressing one or several difficulties at once:

1. Situating a project
2. Setting up a collaboration
3. Establishing a common language
4. Engaging with the community
5. Sustaining partnership
6. Staying with complexity

While reading these recommendations, the project characteristics described should be considered as examples. The authors developed these recommendations primarily to address a variety of collaboration formats, such as educational programmes for university students and community members, seminars or full-semester courses, series of research projects, and formal and non-formal educational initiatives for communities, all of which emerged from the expert interviews and the pilot projects.

However, these contexts come with their own limitations such as collecting practices mostly from the global North with few exceptions (e.g., Brazil and Argentina). Also, half of them offer suggestions for collaborations where students and communities are involved. Similarly, the insights of the pilots (see Chapter 3 on page 30) come from two distinct sets of scenarios: (1) Pilot A is a student project with an established long-term partnership between a local university and community hub, and (2) Pilot B is a design research project with a new collaboration between academia and local NGOs. These contexts cannot be readily applied to any collaboration format without consideration. In general, we need to acknowledge that interinstitutional collaborations can start in different ways; however, a common pattern seems to be personalised connections and networks that aid choosing the criteria. Taking time to think through the incentive behind a collaboration and the initiation process helps clarify appropriate directions and approaches within the design field and in terms of the cooperation.

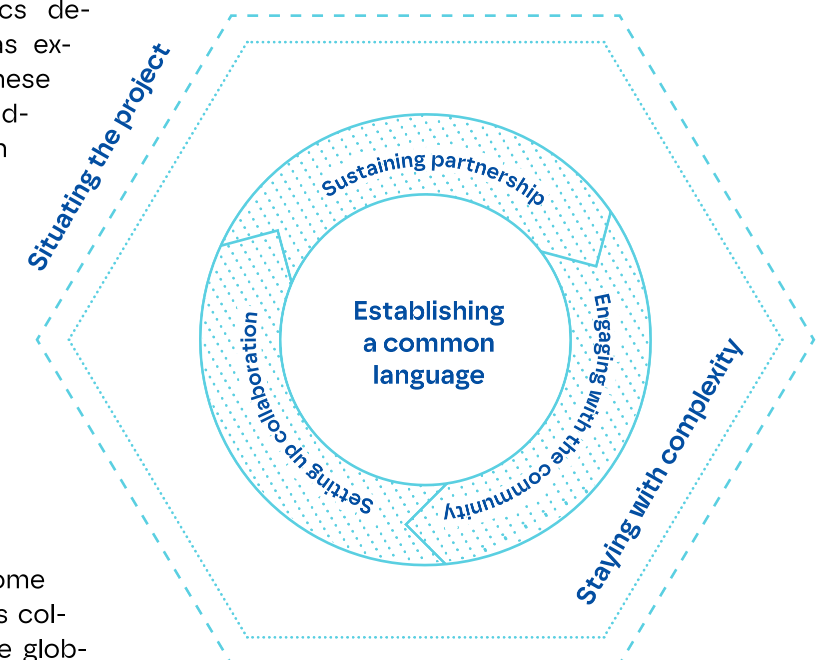


Figure 4. An overview of the six different phases

4.1 Recommendations for Situating a Project

Once the need for collaboration emerges, the process of choosing appropriate theories, approaches, methods, and techniques can begin. Awareness of existing theories and methods lay the foundations for any research project. It is important to situate projects within the design landscape and other relevant fields in order to navigate the process with confidence and awareness. Theories and case studies can provide practical insights on how to tackle challenges or offer strategies for building arguments. However, it is equally important to schedule time for literature review, research, and reflection, as it enhances the learning process and aids the application of the acquired knowledge.

Awareness of existing theories and methods lay the foundations for any research project.

1. Establish Theoretical Connections for Informed Collaboration

It is key for initiators to start by taking time to systematise and make connections between the contemporary theories and themes highlighted by the literature review and follow other relevant topics and authors.

2. Build Shared Ownership by Choosing Research Approaches Collaboratively

The discussion on research approaches and specific tools should go hand-in-hand with the appropriate design theories. Understanding the nature of the chosen approach can lead the collaboration towards appropriate research methods. The key to creating shared project ownership is constructing these approaches together. For example, in the case of Pilot A, students and researchers followed an ethnographic approach while addressing ethical concerns.

3. Prioritise Social Interactions When Selecting Working Methods

The interview mapping in Chapter 2 enabled the emergence of a diverse list of the tools applied (see Figure 3 on page 29) to support divergent and convergent thinking processes while collaborating with non-profits. Two of the most popular research activities were informal conversations and workshops, demonstrating the generative and informal nature of social design.

In addition to structured working methods, both the interviewees and pilot partners emphasized the importance of social interactions and conviviality in fostering successful collaborations. Strong relationships act as the adhesive that enables the application of the aforementioned techniques.

4.2 Recommendations for Setting Up Collaboration

During Pilot B, researchers and NGO representatives highlighted the time-consuming nature of establishing collaboration, estimating a minimum of two years. They stressed the importance of trust and transparency in this process, advocating for these qualities to be established before involving students. This trust-building phase paves the way for new and diverse opportunities, a natural outcome of engaging with multiple actors.

The following list presents eight actionable recommendations for discussing motivations, personal values, and practical limitations that formalise interinstitutional collaborations (such as funding and research ethics). All these recommendations are interconnected and built upon each other, aiming to set the stage for collaboration and manage expectations upfront.

This trust-building phase paves the way for new and diverse opportunities, a natural outcome of engaging with multiple actors.

1. Harness the Power of Relationships: Personal Networks as the Catalysts of Structured Partnerships

Both Pilot projects illustrated that interinstitutional collaborations can have multiple reasons and ways for starting relationship-building. In the case of Pilot A, initial connections between the university and the social cooperative were made by a former student. The first step was to tackle operational challenges within the NGO, which required a more fluid approach. Over time, the partnership became more structured and connected to a specific semester course and its learning outcomes. As the representative of OfficineVispa shared:

"[...] many design collaborations between university projects and the city are linked, because of the students and not because of the institutions looking to work together."

In Pilot B, existing friendships and mutual research interests with some of the collaborating NGO staff members were the key reasons for starting professional partnerships. Open and honest relationships were maintained throughout the process. However, because of its novelty, the process was inevitably messy and needed several readjustments. Furthermore, during the pilot dissemination event in Berlin, a participating NGO underscored the importance of NGOs approaching higher education institutes for research, rather than the other way around. In their view, a match-making platform could serve as a catalyst, connecting researchers and NGOs, thereby emphasising the significance of each party's role in the collaboration.

2. Align Values and Address Power Imbalances to Foster Collaboration

It is crucial to understand that personal principles such as ethics, values, and beliefs play a significant role in shaping these partnerships. A discussion on democratic values and literature on human rights, as suggested by the NGO involved in Pilot B, can serve as a promising starting point. Recognising this influence creates a shared space for strategic planning, with a focus on long-term goals, fostering the potential for more equitable and effective collaborations.

During discussions on values, it is also important to keep in mind the inherent power imbalance in HEI-NGO collaborations. This aspect was brought up several times by the researchers of Pilot A, who mentioned that projects tend to follow the academic calendar and the objectives of the university course. To tackle this, Interviewee No. 1 suggests sharing decision-making responsibilities with the NGOs and the involved communities:

"For the justice system, any citizen is a potential user. So that means each one of us must be involved in this process, and as citizens, we must be involved in decision-making."

In addition, UdK and the NGO Democratic Society in Pilot B took a proactive stance by adopting a key principle: observe instead of imposing anything on the communities; respect the working pace of the NGO; adjust accordingly. This approach was designed to prevent exploitation and to foster mutual respect.

3. Leverage NGO Expertise to Engage Vulnerable Groups

Social design partnerships often engage with vulnerable groups, either directly or indirectly. This was evident in several projects introduced in the interviews and in both pilot cases, where students and researchers immersed themselves in a neighbourhood inhabited by individuals with migrant backgrounds.

As integral members of a community, NGOs often have rich insights into its day-to-day dynamics. Higher educational institutions should take extensive time to understand their experience and listen to their contextual knowledge and interests for participation.

4. Create Interdisciplinary Teams to Stay with Complexity

Complex socio-cultural contexts require multi-faceted and interdisciplinary teams. From the interviews, we have detected the involvement of different groups, including students from various disciplines, design professionals, civil sector experts, and representatives of public institutions.

Depending on the project, all of these groups may be involved at various stages, each playing a pivotal role in the partnership. Fusing knowledge acquired from art with social-sciences-minded design fosters a profound understanding of vulnerable groups and their diverse realities. The careful amalgamation of knowledge from various disciplines establishes deeper connections with the context under study. This interdisciplinary approach also has the potential to uncover and address unconscious biases inherent in each distinct field.

5. Balance Roles and Divide Responsibilities

The next logical aspect within interinstitutional collaborations involves the allocation of roles and the discussion of responsibilities within the team. This part includes thinking from the perspective of diverse actors (academia, students, third sector, city) whether they are directly or indirectly involved in the project. One crucial role that emerged from the interviews is intermediation: communicating with diverse actors, facilitating, and taking care of logistics and project management. This role can be shared between academia and NGOs by carefully dividing responsibilities.

In general, this step involves a collaborative discussion on divergent priorities and schedules, leading to the co-creation of reasonable and flexible timelines that require constant revision. It is equally important to grant autonomy to the NGO. The community and their realities should always be at the centre of the collaboration.

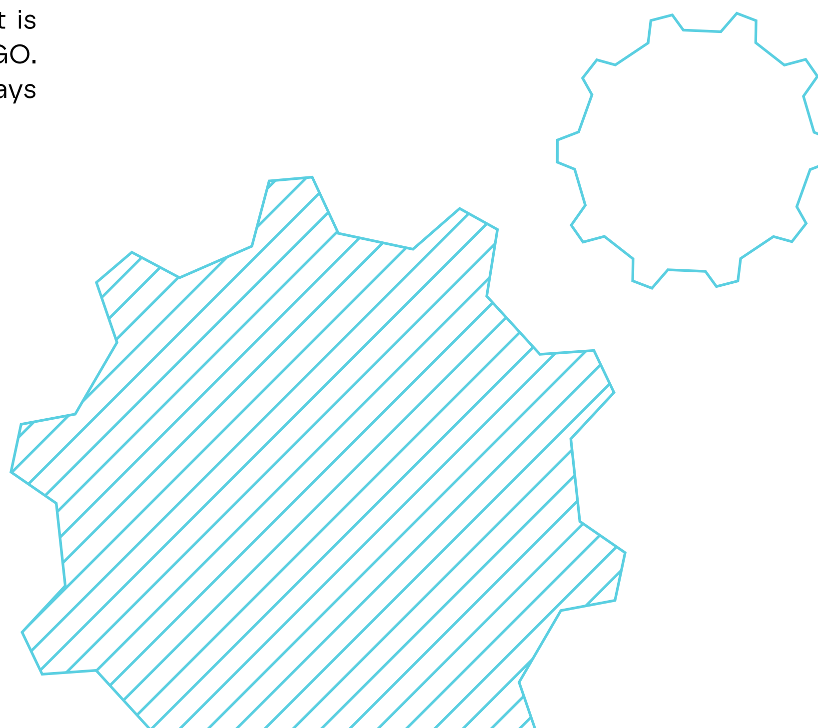
6. Consider Compliance Issues and Research Ethics

When planning to engage with vulnerable groups, it is crucial to consider research ethics and its requirements, such as ensuring privacy, safety, non-maleficence, etc. Therefore, even when not mandatory, it is recommended to obtain approval from the corresponding internal review board or ethics committee of the HEI. Compiling a data management plan that complies with jurisdictional law (such as GDPR in the EU) and preparing informed consent sheets should be prioritized, as these procedures may take longer than anticipated.

For instance, in the case of Pilot A, where researchers were also teachers of the students, approval from the ethical committee was requested and granted. One NGO at Pilot B also emphasised the importance of adhering to the EU's ethical guidelines for researching vulnerable groups such as the LGBTQ+ community, migrants, or asylum seekers, which should be meticulously followed (European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, 2021).

Besides research ethics, addressing broader ethical considerations during planning is vital, as described by a design research professor from Pilot A:

"When we enter into this domain of eco-social transformation, this begs many questions because it's not only about good intentions; we can't be naive at that point. There are things that can go wrong. There are people who can feel harmed or misrepresented."



7. Be Transparent on Funding Opportunities and Ensure Fair Compensation

It is crucial to be transparent about the available funds in order to build trust. Each participating institution should have clear information on the available funds and how they will be allocated. As Interviewee No. 11 mentioned, collaboration should follow the "fair pay for fair work" principle. This raises the question of how to ensure meaningful participation, and what is offered in return for time investment.

This process should begin as early as the start of the funding proposal. As UdK, the leader of Pilot B, mentions, *"implementation of new collaborations usually takes more time and effort than anticipated in the first place"*. One way to overcome this is to allocate more resources for this stage, taking into consideration unforeseen events and shortfalls.

8. Manage Expectations by Establishing Adjustable Timelines and Formalising Collaboration

Setting up regular formal and informal meetings might help create a structured and flexible plan, providing a sense of preparedness for both parties. Arriving at a visual overview of the timeline creates clarity for all participants. However, the most important aspect is to remain adaptable and make ongoing adjustments, as Interviewee No. 2 noted:

"I think about having reasonable timelines that allow for the unexpected to happen, but also maintain accountability, so you are able to adjust and [you are] still going to achieve a real outcome."

The importance of documenting all formal and informal discussions cannot be overstated. This documentation is essential in creating a shared-vision document, a point emphasised by OfficineVispa during Pilot A. They noted that some form of structure is beneficial for both parties involved. The formalisation of interinstitutional collaboration, shared funding opportunities, and recognizing the NGOs can pave the way for sustaining long-term collaboration.

PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS TO ENHANCE COLLABORATION BETWEEN NGOS AND ACADEMIA

4.3 Recommendations for Establishing a Common Language

While examining the practical aspects of a collaboration, efforts should be made to establish a common language between multiple actors. This process commences when setting up the collaboration and continues while engaging with the broader community. It is a journey that necessitates careful and respectful communication, the acquisition of soft skills, and constant reflection. The cornerstone of this process is to build and maintain trust, a delicate yet vital component of interinstitutional collaboration.

1. Master Soft Skills

Several interviewees emphasised the transformative power of soft skills such as empathy, patience, active listening, proactive approach, assertive communication, etc. They shared that communication is a skill that can and should be collectively discussed and practised, leading to profound changes in relationship-building. Training sessions or lessons dedicated to these topics might prepare participants upfront for conflicting and diverging views. In addition, the literature review and interview analysis highlighted dialogic approaches in social design partnerships. Interviewee No. 14 describes this process as follows:

"The recognition of dialogue and dialogism means that everyone learns a bit, and the discourse moves towards a more horizontal form of knowledge. I think this only happens when a certain level of commitment, observation, and active listening is present. It's certainly not accidental."

The cornerstone of this process is to build and maintain trust, a delicate yet vital component of interinstitutional collaboration.

2. Communicate with Care

Besides soft skills, communication is about being respectful and candid. Creating a sense of community and a safe space takes time. Activities such as open discussions and shared experiences allow these spaces to emerge.

Both the literature review and the interview analysis pointed out that the difference in language between HEIs and NGOs is one of the main challenges. One crucial rule of thumb might be avoiding special terminology unless it is necessary. Finding a shared language, including terminology that can be understood across disciplines and various actors, is not just important but indispensable for effective communication. This idea was brought forward by a professor involved in Pilot A:

"I'm interested in how we can remove the jargon we use. It is fine for our papers, but it tends to create barriers when we work with NGOs and non-academic partners."

One of the distinctive methods adopted in Pilot A was the organisation of collective lunches in the community. These gatherings provided opportunities for students and partners to get to know each other. The responsibility of fostering a caring environment, a task shared among all participants, was particularly evident in the proactive role of students in initiating these interactions.

3. Utilise the Power of Regular Reflection

Accountability is a collective endeavour, and reflective meetings, peer-to-peer interviews, and perception questionnaires are tools that can aid in this process. These methods encourage individuals to confront each other in terms of aims, goals, and directions. For example, in Pilot A, students conducted interviews to analyse the participatory process, which they found to be particularly beneficial according to one of the researchers:

"Students appreciated the opportunity to learn about each other's experiences, confront and compare perspectives. They valued the fact that they could add their own questions to the interview structure we prepared for them […]."

In Pilot B, researchers and students participated in a lecture and workshop on responsibility and ethics in design. This reflective session prepared students for their semester projects with communities and fostered a collaborative mindset for meaningful community and NGO engagement.

4. Invest in Quality Interactions in order to Build Trust

As outlined in the previous principles, the process of building connections consists of several steps that aid trust-building. This process, although time-consuming, is a worthwhile investment. As UdK and the NGO Democratic Society from Pilot B have pointed out, relationship building should involve multiple individuals from an organisation. In addition, investing in quality interactions, particularly through informal and face-to-face meetings, can significantly increase the chances of arriving at common ground. Open and consistent communication marked by kindness and respect are essential ingredients for sustainable connections. Interviewee No. 3 highlighted the importance of this process as follows:

"Building trust takes years of working together. To become a better designer you have to understand the context in which they operate […]."

4.4 Recommendations for Engaging with the Community

At this stage, students and/or design researchers meet with the broader community in a co-creation process that can take a multiplicity of forms. The process can start by immersing in the community's realities, learning about the context without making assumptions through carefully chosen research activities, such as observations, interventions, and match-making events. This stage also includes adapting to the context, building relational capacities, and managing conflicts. Lastly, students and researchers can offer their modest contribution to local transformations through making and visualizing, a process that has the potential to inspire positive change.

Figure 5 & Figure 6. A context mapping workshop with students

1. Immersing in the Context: Observe, Connect, and Learn Together

Understanding the context is a shared responsibility among researchers, professors, students, and other stakeholders involved. Numerous NGOs, such as Nachbarschaftszentrum Steinmetzstrasse in Pilot B, have emphasised the importance of identifying key community members. As discussed before, relationship building is also a task that falls on the shoulders of the participating students. As highlighted by the researchers in Pilot A, "students, as regular visitors to these communities, play a crucial role in our work".

For instance, in Pilot A, students were introduced to the Don Bosco neighbourhood through a variety of activities such as walks, observations, context mapping workshops, and quick site-specific interventions through which they had the opportunity to learn and engage. Facilitated by the researchers, the observations and context mapping (Figures 5 and 6) provided a deeper understanding of the community. The site-specific interventions, a platform for students to materialize their ideas and engage with locals, allowed for more active involvement in the community from the outset.

Additionally, in order to ensure that participation is based on mutual interest, course leaders and Officine Vispa, a partner in Pilot A, organised a matchmaking event between students and local third-sector actors. Some of the connections made during that event continued throughout the semester. To strengthen these networks even more, course leaders should schedule separate meetings with all organisations to explain the purpose and benefits of these types of encounters from the organisations' perspective.

2. Invite Students to Get Involved in the Collaboration as Mediators

Based on the interviews, mediation was identified as a key role. This role should also be assigned to the students, who must maintain a constant presence in the community and take responsibility for building relationships. This role also implies being able to translate social design theory into the reality of the community and articulate the designer's position clearly. As one of the professors involved in Pilot A states, students also need to 'open up' the imagination of NGOs and other local partners to possibilities that may not initially seem feasible to them. This also requires mutual learning and horizontal knowledge sharing.

The essence of a caring and non-extractive interinstitutional collaboration lies in the 'promise what you can deliver' mindset, as underscored by Andrew Shea (2012). To embody this, students must maintain an open mindset, free from preconceived expectations and the self-serving approach of *"I go there only because I want information for my project"*, to quote one of the interviews on Pilot A. One effective strategy is to develop relational capacities, allowing students to adapt their planned activities to the community's needs and the dynamics of the dialogue.

3. Be Aware of Both the Emotional and Operational Challenges of a Co-creation Project

The principles mentioned in the previous section, such as careful and respectful communication and learning soft skills, are not merely guidelines. Instead, they are the pillars that support the participatory process, particularly when it comes to managing divergent and conflicting views. This is the stage where communication and negotiating skills are crucial, especially when engaging with NGOs and multiple members of the community. As the insights of Pilot B suggest, inclusive spaces and rooms stimulate interaction and active participation.

When interacting with vulnerable groups, students may face various challenges, including exposure to psychological factors related to the community. This challenge can cause passivity and burnout. As mentioned by the course leader in Pilot A, it is also essential for students to take an active role in managing their expectations, understanding how much participation they can ask from the community, and being aware that because of the limited time available to them, "commitment can only be superficial".

In such situations, the role of course leaders becomes even more significant. They must not only schedule time for reflection but also address the emotional side of partnerships. Equipping students with practical self-management tools can help them navigate these challenges more effectively.

4. Foster Creativity and Learning by Rapid Making and Visualisation Activities

Quick making exercises, such as site-specific interventions, are not just about encouraging creative thinking and active prototyping. They also promote the practical application of the design mindset. Even within a tight schedule, students can devise interactions with available materials. For example, in Pilot A, one student (Figure 5) explored how people move in the neighbourhood by marking formal and informal pathways with chalk, natural pigments, and spices. Another student (Figure 6) explored using existing structures for social encounters and interaction through music. These small-scale investigations allow for the testing of ideas and mapping of local interests rapidly.

In addition to a making mindset, documenting the participatory and creative processes through pictures, notes, and personal reflections systematically and visually informs the making of design proposals and helps identify the value created. This comprehensive documentation — which includes texts, visuals, and self-reflections in the form of recordings — enhances understanding and supports more effective analysis of the learning process.

PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS TO ENHANCE COLLABORATION BETWEEN NGOS AND ACADEMIA

4.5 Recommendations for Sustaining Partnerships

Sustaining and maintaining relationships is another complex aspect of interinstitutional collaborations. According to researchers in Pilot A, long-term sustainability can only be achieved through the proper sharing of the project outcomes with all partners. In general, discussions on longevity should begin at the outset, and the analysis of the joint processes should inform the revision of future projects.

1. Plan for Continuity

Defining longevity should be addressed during the planning stage. Collectively mapping out the options for continuity can clarify how the projects should be concluded and carried forward. For example, in Pilot A, actors explored different ways to sustain collaboration, such as focusing on the same topic during the next semester with the same partners, or continuing the partnership through community and voluntary work. Interviewee No. 9 described this process as follows:

"Determining collective guidelines for sustainability at the beginning, rather than at the end, [and] maintaining the projects through whatever means possible within the academic institution [are] important for ongoing collaboration."

In the case of Pilot A, where collaboration extended over several years, the importance of building on previous years' outcomes becomes evident. This not only avoids reinventing the wheel but also contributes to significant transformations at a local level. As the conversations with Pilot A actors revealed, this could be facilitated by archiving the projects in a more systematic and accessible manner, thereby ensuring their relevance and usefulness for future reference and transformation.

2. Define and Assess what Really Matters in Order to Analyse Impact

As the interviewees emphasised, while there are no fixed recipes for evaluation, narrative and qualitative assessment methods such as simple surveys and guided conversations are consistently recommended for analysis. When used in conjunction with indicators suggested by Pilot B, like participant satisfaction, behaviour change, and community engagement, these methods can provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact and outcomes of interinstitutional collaborations. Creating an environment of honesty, trust, and fairness is pivotal for this process, empowering actors to share personal opinions.

Collaboratively defining success criteria and analysing the indicators mentioned above could be a starting point. To ensure continuous feedback and analysis, findings from Pilot B suggest creating communication channels between participating actors from the start of the project. This approach ensures that reflections and feedback are systematically gathered and readily available for analysis.

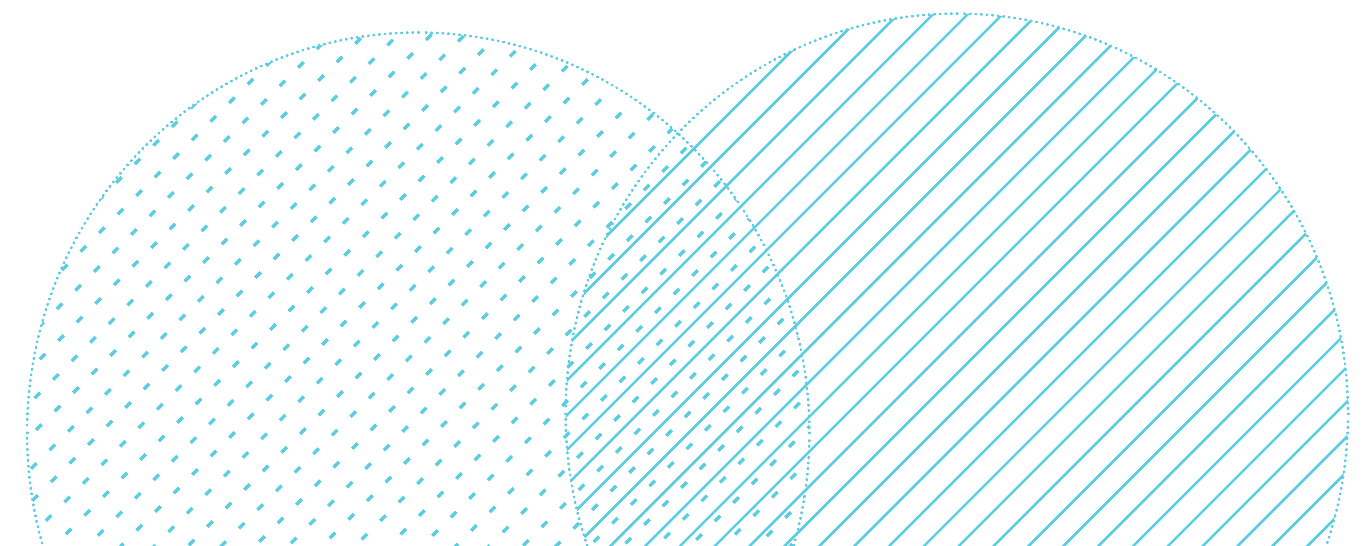
Figure 7. "The Walk of Light Interventions" (on the left), an activity based on students' observations and fascinations

4.6 Staying with Complexity

The previous sections aimed to provide practical recommendations for interinstitutional collaboration. However, it is important to acknowledge that addressing all these challenges at once is not possible. Some obstacles cannot be overcome in a single project.

In Pilot A, the identified "troubles" included time, language, care, reciprocity, and continuity. During the panel discussion, the audience and researchers reviewed this list, renaming continuity as persistence in trying to bring change, and adding power and economics (Figure 8). This list of barriers should act as a reminder to choose carefully what part of the process can be improved within the given context. As the last suggestion, inspired by Haraway (2016), it is important to become connected in the unexpected.

Figure 8. Concluding remarks by unibz during the pilot dissemination stage in Pilot A, Illustrations by Nicole Faiella



PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS TO ENHANCE COLLABORATION BETWEEN NGOS AND ACADEMIA

PART 02

Collective Reflective Practice

05

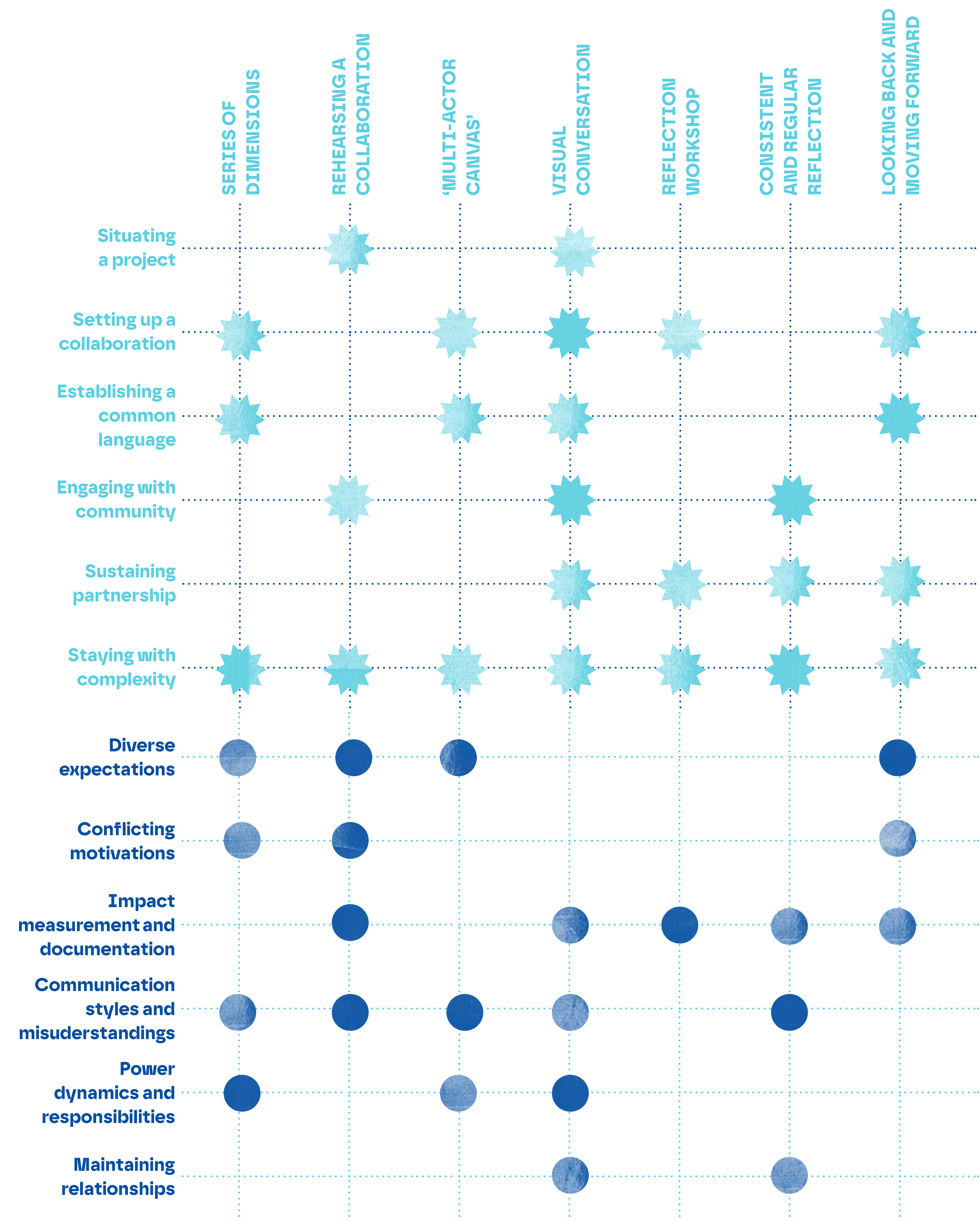


Figure 9. An overview of the seven workshop format

In addition to the above-described practical recommendations, this section focuses on developing workshop formats to better aid collective, respectful, and mutually beneficial discussions between NGOs and HEIs that focus on social design and related fields on the one hand, and students and the broader communities impacted by the collaboration on the other. The experts interviewed and the researchers conducting the two pilots expressed a need for more adaptable frameworks and project management tools that address the complexity inherent in social-design-related partnerships. Therefore, in developing and presenting the following conceptual workshop formats, members of the Change Agent project aim to emphasise the flexible, dialogic, visual, and sensory nature of the tools necessary for fostering mutual and shared understanding among multiple actors. As is often the case in social design, the process itself can become the outcome. This can also be true of the workshops designed to clarify these types of collaborations.

The proposed list below includes previously tested concepts from both pilots, such as the 'Looking Back and Moving Forward' workshop, as well as new formats co-developed by researchers as part of the Change Agents project. In total, seven thematic workshops emerged, each addressing an essential aspect of interinstitutional collaborations:

(1) 'Series of Dimensions' Workshop: A list of principles for crafting a value assessment plan, canvases for analysing openness to transformation and mapping expertise between partners, and a collaborative profile.

(2) 'Rehearsing a Collaboration' Workshop: To create awareness of the different phases and potential challenges in partnerships.

(3) 'Multi-actor Canvas' Workshop: To constantly negotiate roles and responsibilities between multiple actors.

(4) 'Visual Conversation' Workshop: To discuss the complexities of community engagement.

(5) 'Reflection' Workshop: To map internal and external reflective research methods.

(6) 'Looking Back and Moving Forward' Workshop: To discuss turning points in the process and identify ways to sustain long-term collaboration.

(7) 'Principles for Impact and Value' Workshop: To mutually agree on the evaluation plan.

Figure 9 visually represents visually represents the relationships among the workshops, situating them within the conceptual model of the project phases (see Figure 4, An overview of the six different phases on page 45) and connecting them to the identified challenges listed in the Summary of Part 1 (page 40).

In developing the workshops mentioned above, key social design principles identified in the literature review were adopted. Co-creating agreements and processes with and for NGOs, communities, and students is a key instrument to aid project management. Through a co-creation experience that includes never-ending and often agonistic (Mouffe, 2000) discussions (see 1.2.1 on page XX), we build each other's capabilities (Guersenzvaig, 2001). All these formats follow the perspectives model defined by Bratteteig et al. (2012), which focuses on 1) having a say, 2) mutual learning, and 3) co-creation (see 1.2.2 on page 16). As the latter emphasises, making shared decisions helps ease, but does not eliminate, the inherent power dynamics in interinstitutional collaboration. In addition, the practical creation of the workshop plans was guided by the design justice principles developed by Costanza-Chock (2020), which emphasise lived experience and view designers as facilitators.

As some external reviewer pointed out, some of the workshops may seem a bit complex at first, which is why clear guidance is needed for implementing them. It is crucial not only for the HEI team to fully understand each step, but also for other participants to receive as much support as possible in developing their understanding.

Figure 10. Kick-Off workshop at MOME

Guidelines for implementing the workshops:

- Include relevant actors (decision-makers) from all partners (academia, NGOs, and the community). When considering who needs to be involved, it is important to understand that each inclusion process automatically excludes someone.
- In general, the workshops incorporate concepts for active making, and offer collective reflection opportunities. Although most of them are designed for collective use, taking time for internal and individual reflection might be beneficial.
- The workshop formats exist independently yet are interconnected. When utilising them, their application should be flexible; stakeholders should select the most relevant ones and adapt them to the given context.
- Optimal outcomes will be achieved if participants are encouraged to be open and to trust one other. This means that both the physical and mental space should be just, participatory, and inclusive, following feminist, anti-racist, anti-colonial, and non-ableist principles.
- The facilitator plays a crucial role during the workshop, adapting to the natural pace of the discussions and flexibly adjusting the allocated time and the order of activities to suit the participants' rhythm. It is beneficial to provide an overview of all activities and materials at the beginning, so participants are aware of the general direction and purpose of the workshop.
- When developing a conversation, it is essential to follow Design Justice Principle No. 4 (Costanza-Chock, 2020), which states that change should be viewed as emergent from an accountable, accessible, and collaborative process, rather than as a point at the end of a process. Furthermore, keep in mind that being open to change is a vulnerable position. Therefore, it is important to secure the described process with trust building among the partners. This often overlooked aspect requires attention from the facilitator. As trust building is a slow process, we suggest returning to the first 'Openness to Transformation' canvas later in the collaboration, after participants have reached a certain level of mutual trust.
- Document the discussions on the enclosed canvases and capture any other relevant topic that emerges and may need further attention.
- While the workshop activities suggest a certain sequence, the iterative nature of the design process should not be neglected. Participants should be inspired to be creative and flexible when applying them.

To sum up, the compiled workshop formats aim to bring awareness and clarity rather than simplify or eliminate complexity. While many challenges arise in the process, many interviewees mentioned that the most significant obstacles emerged in building and maintaining relationships with NGOs and communities.

COLLECTIVE REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

5.1 'Series of Dimensions' Workshop

As stated in the literature review (Part 1), there are "diverse ways in which design can be used to address social issues and create positive change in the world". The 'Series of Dimensions' workshop helps navigate these diversities by discussing partners' basic values, expertise, and openness to transformation.

This planning workshop fosters open dialogue and helps to prevent 'future troubles"'. After establishing the shared guiding principles of the collaboration, the workshop is divided into three parts, each with a specific focus and a supporting worksheet to facilitate discussions.

THE GOAL OF THIS WORKSHOP:

To facilitate collaborative discussions, ensure effective cooperation and manage expectations among stakeholders by fostering openness to change, mapping existing and required expertise, and establishing a shared mission for inclusive and participatory design processes.

Participants: Researchers or course leaders and NGO representatives

Duration: A 2.5-hour workshop (may be split into two sessions) + one to two hours for digitalization

Description of activities:

(1) Introduce yourself to the group (5 min)

(2) Discussion on design principles (30 min)

(3) Discussion on openness to change and transform (20 min) — See Canvas No. 1: Openness to Transformation

(4) Conversation about existing and required expertise in the partner organisations (20 min) — See Canvas No. 2: Expertise Mapping

(5) Discussion of the collaboration profile based on given parameters, leading to a shared mission statement (30 min) — See Canvas No. 3: Establishing a Just, Participatory, and Inclusive Design Space for Collaboration

(6) Revision of all canvases, making adjustments and final notes (20 min)

(7) Group reflection on insights and key takeaways (25 min)

(8) Follow-up of the workshop: Digitalisation of the co-created process and sharing with all relevant actors (one to two hours)

The First Dimension: A List of Principles to Craft Value

To follow the design justice principles proposed by Costanza-Chock (2020) and to achieve a participatory, inclusive, and just collaboration, it is important to invest time before the collaboration starts to understand each other's values, aims, working culture and rituals, expertise, and ability and willingness to contribute. Based on Constanza-Chock's Design Justice Principles, we suggest developing and discussing a list of principles together with the partners that could potentially guide the collaboration. It is important to adjust these general principles to the exact aspects of the collaboration.

DESIGN JUSTICE PRINCIPLES (Costanza-Chock, 2020)

→ **Principle 1**
We use design to sustain, heal, and empower our communities, as well as to seek liberation from exploitative and oppressive systems.

→ **Principle 2**
We centre the voices of those who are directly impacted by the outcomes of the design process.

→ **Principle 3**
We prioritise design's impact on the community over the intentions of the designer.

→ **Principle 4**
We view change as emergent from an accountable, accessible, and collaborative process, rather than as a point at the end of a process.

→ **Principle 5**
We see the role of the designer as a facilitator rather than an expert.

→ **Principle 6**
We believe that everyone is an expert based on their own lived experience, and that we all have unique and brilliant contributions to bring to a design process.

→ **Principle 7**
We share design knowledge and tools with our communities.

→ **Principle 8**
We work towards sustainable, community-led and -controlled outcomes.

→ **Principle 9**
We work towards non-exploitative solutions that reconnect us to the earth and to each other.

→ **Principle 10**
Before seeking new design solutions, we look for what is already working at the community level. We honour and uplift traditional, indigenous, and local knowledge and practices.

The Second Dimension: Openness to Transformation (Canvas No. 1)

In general, this step includes two main topics for discussion:

(1) What does change mean to you in this collaboration? What kind of change is in your interest?

(2) Do you wish to change the circumstances? Your institution? Your partner? Or perhaps your community? Do you wish to change service provision? Or a policy?

The first question is quite broad. It aims to help participants start thinking through their motivations for and interests in collaboration. The second question is intended to prompt reflection on what the change is or could be in terms of future practice. During this conversation, participants can engage in reflection on what could be changed and on their readiness for different transformations, including personal change. This second part of the discussion should be documented on the radial scheme on the canvas, which contains layers where participants should mark their readiness for transition with Post-it notes (see Figure 11, where some domains for change, such as service provision or overall circumstances, are named for inspiration). The canvas brings together all partners' approaches to change, helping to set expectations for the collaboration.

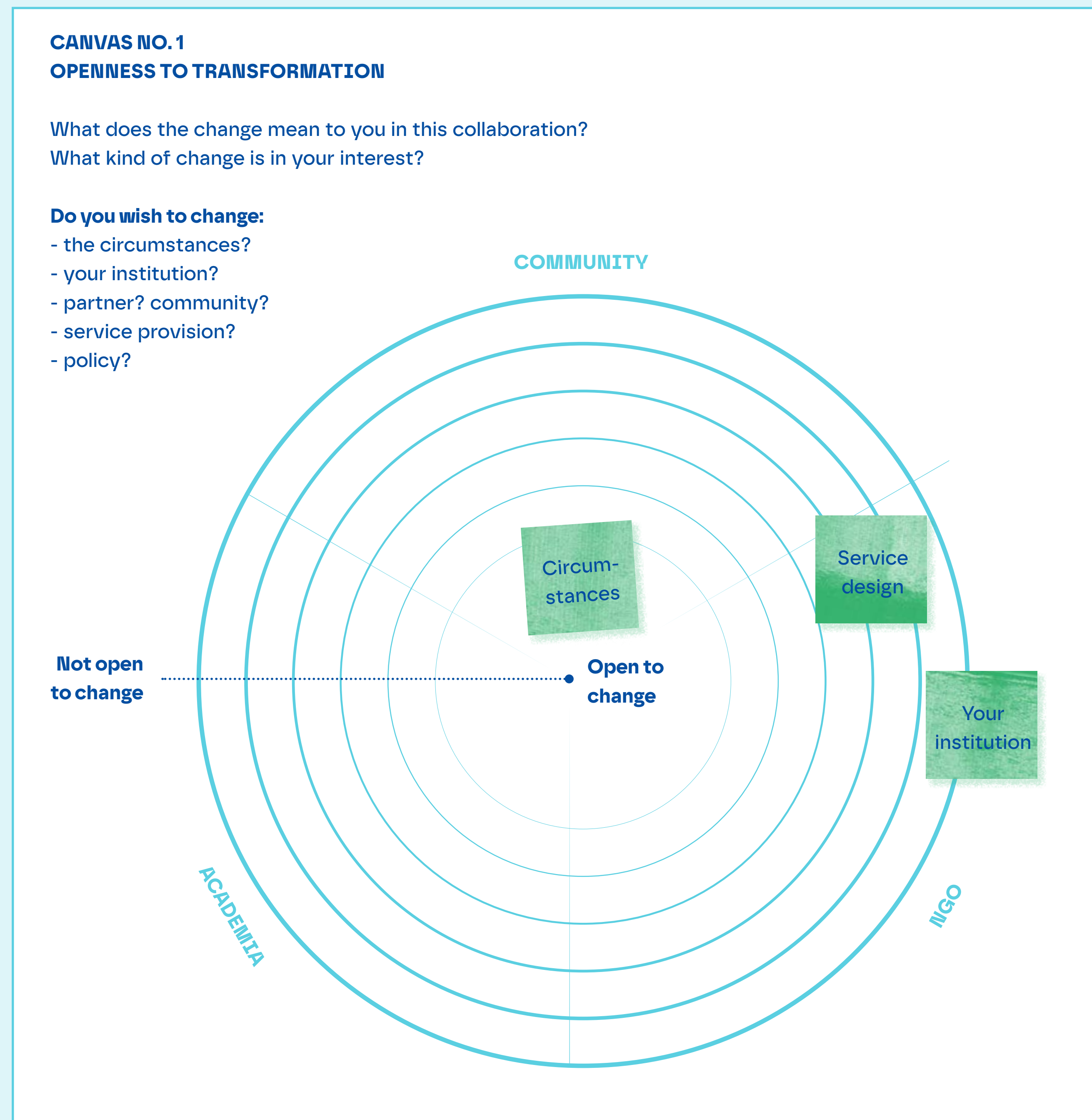


Figure 11. Openness to transformation

COLLECTIVE REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

The Third Dimension: Expertise Mapping (Canvas No. 2)

The expertise mapping exercise explores the involvement of various expertise in the collaboration, discussing:

(1) What types of expertise are involved in the collaboration?

(2) How is each type of expertise represented across the partner organisations?

(3) How does each type of expertise contribute to the project's objectives?

(4) What additional types of expertise would benefit the project ?

The canvas is divided into three sections, one for each partner. The centre of the scheme represents available types of expertise, while the outer circle represents required but unavailable types of expertise. Each partner should add the types of expertise available to them to the canvas, which will then collectively represent the available and required but unavailable knowledge, skills, and practices. Mapped experiences can differ. The map can highlight not only professional expertise as valuable but also, for example, expertise gained through personal experience in relation to a subject, issue, etc.

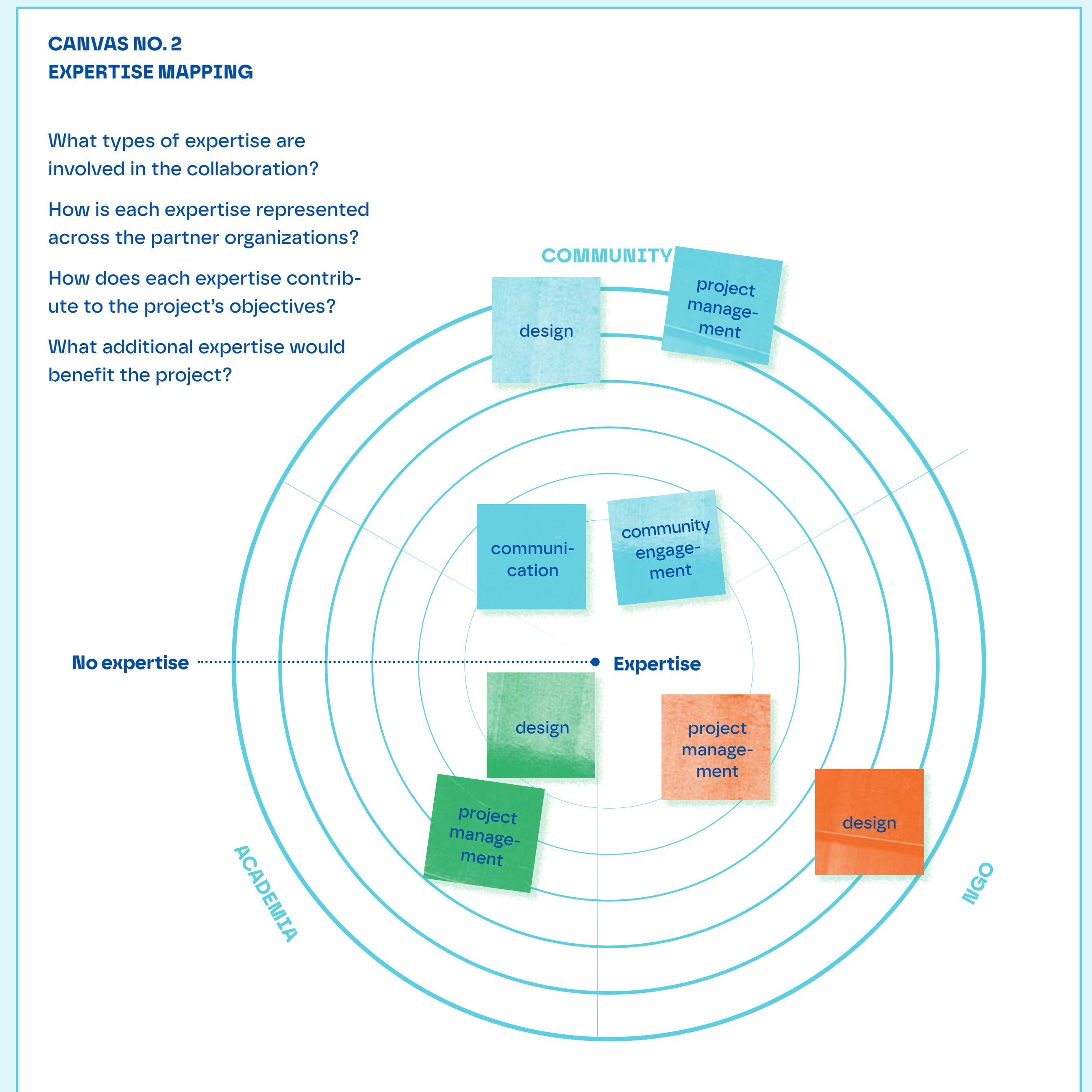
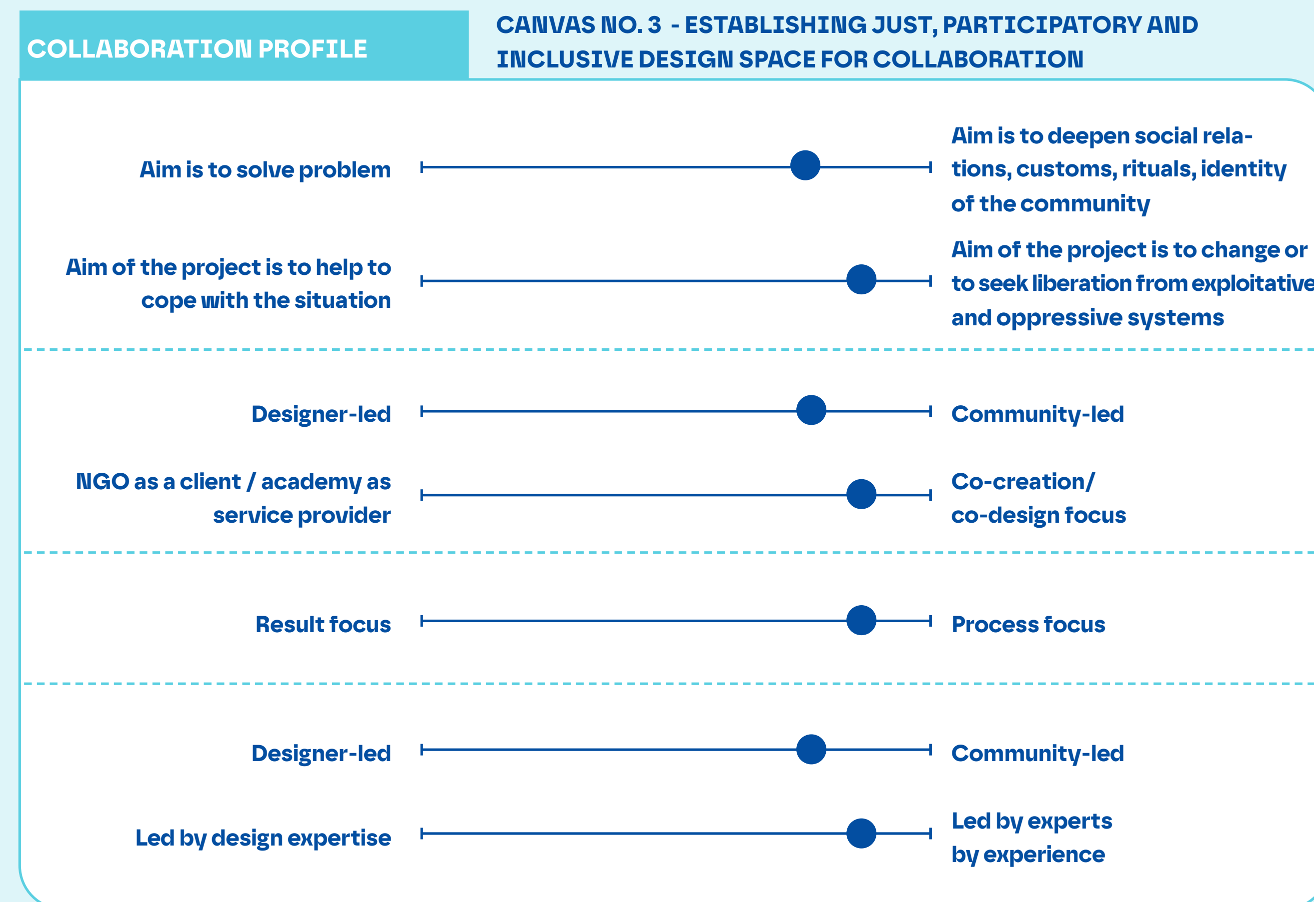


Figure 12. Expertise mapping

The Fourth Dimension: Establishing a Just, Participatory, and Inclusive Design Space for Collaboration (Canvas No. 3)

The third canvas explores the main principles of collaboration and assists users in complying with the guidelines. It consists of two parts: the 'Collaboration profile' and the 'Shared mission statement'.

On the left side, the collaboration profile consists of scales presenting different approaches. As a result of the discussion, partners should situate themselves on the line according to their collaboration type and shared values. On the right side, the theme of each scale is supported by a leading question. The shared mission statement is formulated by answering these questions. The scales and questions are organised into four horizontal sets. Additional topics can be incorporated should the scope of the projects so require.



SHARED MISSION STATEMENT

How is the aim aligned with the community's well-being; being empowered and healed?	Who makes decisions? How are decisions made?
Are you seeking active or delegated participation?	How does your collaboration follow feminist, anti-racist, anti-colonial, and non-ableist design practices?

Figure 13. Collaboration profile

5.2 'Rehearsing Collaboration' Workshop

Once the circumstances are mapped and the collaboration profile has been identified in the initial stage, reserving some time for planning the collaborative process might help avoid future misunderstandings and manage expectations. This workshop format builds on the practical recommendations of design justice (Costanza-Chock, 2020) by adopting co-design methods and investing in mutual learning processes.

THE GOAL OF THE WORKSHOP:

Through a one-and-a-half-hour session, relevant actors from the HEI and NGO will not only reflect upon the upcoming process but also create a written agreement, think through potential troubles and ways to address them, and reflect upon the messy, divergent, and convergent ways of creative thinking. This active participation ensures that a co-created process emerges that can become a basis for action and future discussions.

Participants: Researchers or course leaders and NGO representatives

Duration: A 1.5 hour workshop + one to two hours for digitalization

Description of activities:

(1) Introduce yourself to the group (5 min)

(2) Review collaboration profile and make changes as necessary (15 min)

(3) Create four phases of the collaboration and mark them on a table with Post-it notes (10 min)

(4) Annotate activities for each phase with Post-it notes (10 min)

(5) Visually represent an iterative process using yarn (5 min)

(6) Indicate the timeline with tape (5 min)

(7) Mark potential troubles using clay and red flags (10 min)

(8) Add activities to address troubles using clay and green flags (10 min)

(9) Reflect on learnings and takeaways as a group (20 min)

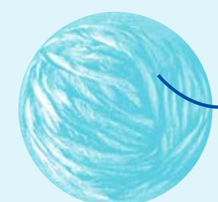
(10) Follow-up: Digitalise the co-created process and share with all relevant actors, for example, in a shared Miro board (one to two hours)

For the activities listed in the description, the following materials (Photo xxx) and worksheets can aid the conversation:

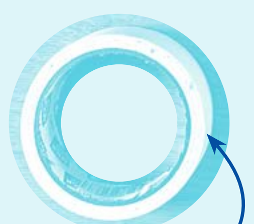
Clay and **green flags** to represent additional activities required to overcome troubles.

Clay and **red flags** to mark potential challenges

Post-it notes to mark phases and activities;



Yarn for representing an iterative process;



Tape for marking timelines in months;

Collaboration profile for scenario building (as discussed in the previous section)

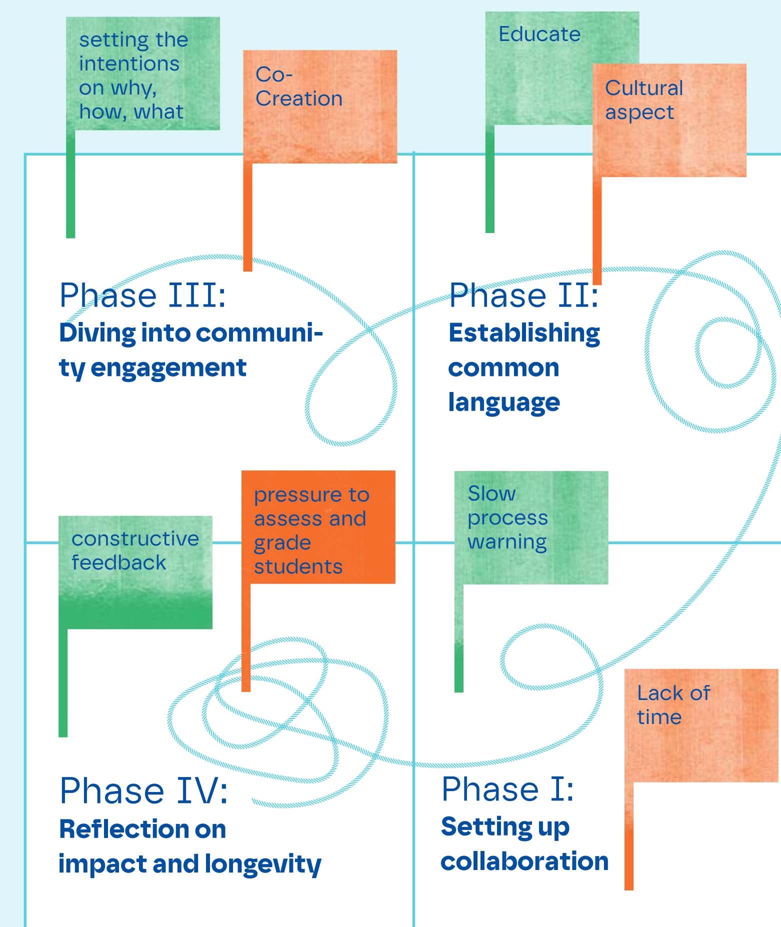
This workshop format was tested during the Cumulus conference in Budapest (Figure 14), where participants noted an increased problem-solving attitude and realised the need for constant reassessment as a result of these activities.

During the workshop at the Cumulus conference, four groups collaborated to create a process based on given scenarios and phases, resulting in two very different process examples illustrated in Figure 15. One example follows a two-by-two quadrant structure, while the other adopts a circular arrangement in which each phase is affected by the next. In both examples, the iterative and inevitably messy process is represented by a blue curvy line. Additionally, each group encountered different challenges: one group emphasised discussions on ethics and unpaid labour and suggested providing vouchers for all participants, while the other emphasised the importance of informal meetings and social interactions.

These two examples demonstrate how collaborative processes can be seen and understood differently. Therefore, the benefit of this workshop lies within the listening activity itself: getting to know each other's values, discussing potential struggles, problem-solving together, and meticulously documenting the process for future work.

Figure 14. Workshop in action during the Cumulus Budapest 2024 conference. Photographed by Máté Lakos

Figure 15. Process outcomes from the Cumulus workshop



5.3

'Multi-actor Canvas' Workshop

This multi-actor workshop allows both HEIs and NGOs to consider perspectives from six different angles:

(1) course leaders or lead researchers from academia,

(2) students involved in the course or research project,

(3) project managers from the NGO,

(4) the wider community from a specific area,

(5) local or central government, and

(6) external experts from the private or public sector.

The central section of the Responsibilities Canvas features a list of potential roles derived from expert interviews reflecting on project management activities (such as coordination, bridging between different stakeholders, financing, policy analysis and development, communication, and networking) and research activities (including synthesising, analysing, documenting, creating, prototyping, and publishing).

THE GOAL OF THE WORKSHOP:

The goal of the workshop is to facilitate a structured dialogue between participating HEIs and NGOs (and possibly other relevant stakeholders) to collaboratively define and clarify roles and responsibilities for various stakeholders involved in the collaboration. By considering perspectives from six different angles, the workshop aims to ensure that all stakeholders are aligned in their contributions and understand their individual and collective roles.

Participants: Researchers or course leaders, NGO representatives, and possibly other relevant stakeholders

Duration: A two-hour workshop + one to two hours for digitalization

Tools needed: Post-it notes or small pieces of paper for writing the elements down, markers, and a large sheet of paper for placing the Post-it notes on.

Description of activities:

(1) Introduce yourself to the group (5 min)

(2) Review the list of roles together and add new ones if applicable (30 min)

(3) Assign roles to actors (each role can be filled by multiple actors) (30 min)

(4) Discuss potential challenges and turning points (30 min)

(5) Reflect on the learnings and takeaways as a group (25 min)

(6) Follow-up: Digitalise the co-created outcome and share with all relevant actors (one to two hours)

The discussion can be launched by utilising the Responsibilities canvas shown in Figure 16. Participants can assign the roles and responsibilities listed in the centre to each actor. The canvas differentiates between two types of tasks: primary responsibilities and secondary tasks.

Ongoing reflection and openness to change are essential for engaging in this activity, ensuring clarity and managing expectations. Inevitably, as the collaboration progresses, roles and responsibilities between academia and NGO will develop over time and change multiple times. Collaborators can reflect on these changes using this canvas later on as well.

COLLECTIVE REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

RESPONSIBILITIES CANVAS

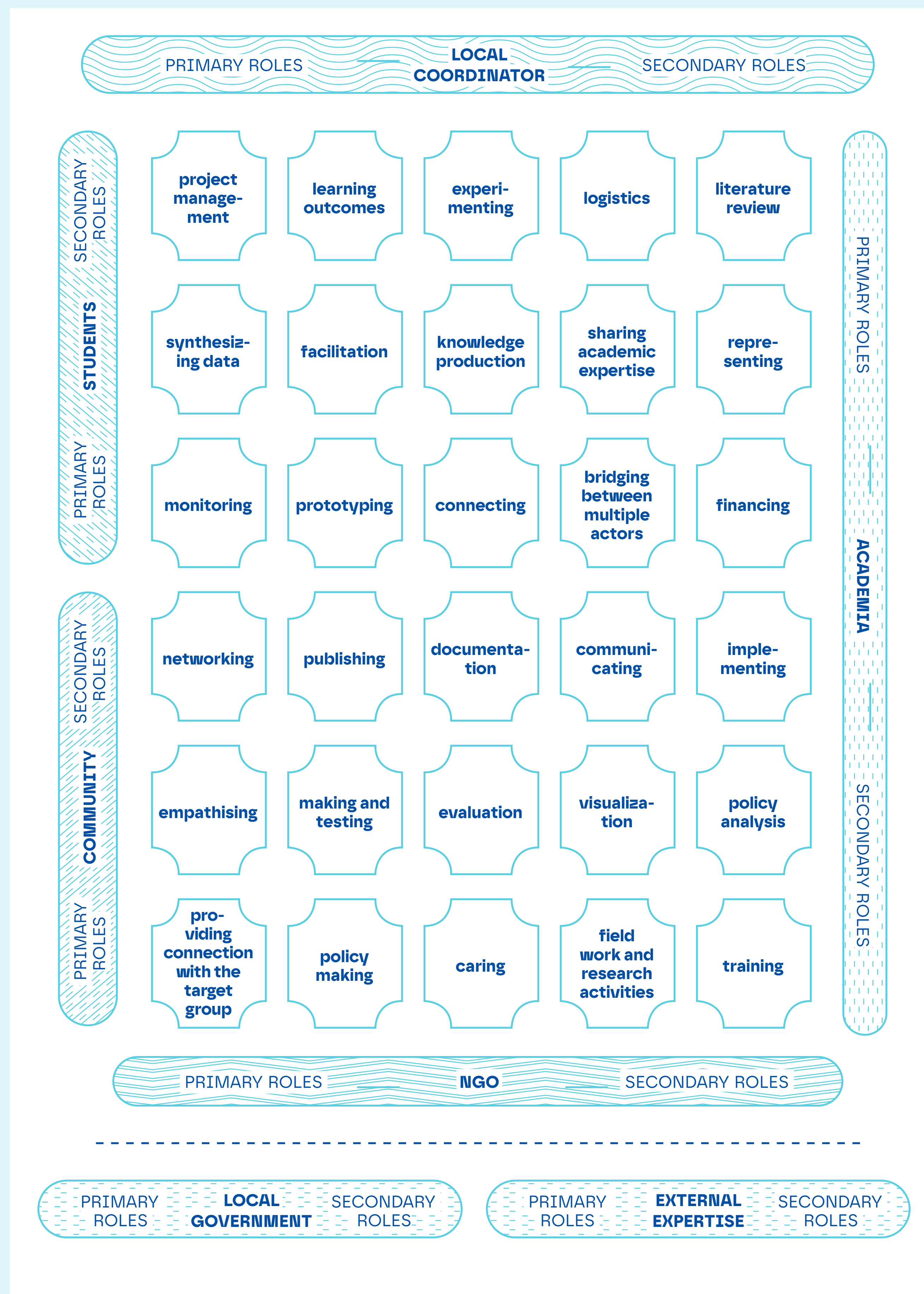


Figure 16. The Responsibilities canvas

5.4 'Visual Conversation' Workshop

Through the previous exercises, HEIs and NGOs established a common ground about the research topic, agreed on the approach, and divided responsibilities. The next crucial stage aims to raise awareness about the complexity of community engagement and explain emergent processes to the broader community and students involved, thus adopting the co-realisation stage from the perspectives model (Bratteteig et al., 2012). By visualising learning loops, participants can gain a more detailed understanding of the entangled nature of the collaboration and position themselves in relation to other research activities.

THE GOAL OF THE WORKSHOP:

Utilise this tool as a visual metaphor to ease and facilitate conversation, clarify relationships, and manage expectations.

Participants: Students and communities with the facilitation of the course leader or researcher

Duration: A 3-hour workshop + one to two hours for digitalization

Description of activities:

(1) Introduce yourself to the group (5 min)

(2) Introduce the collaborative process through a visual (30 min)

(3) Facilitate open discussion with active documentation (one hour)

(4) Add comments and make changes to the drawing (one hour)

(5) Reflect on learnings and takeaways as a group (25 min)

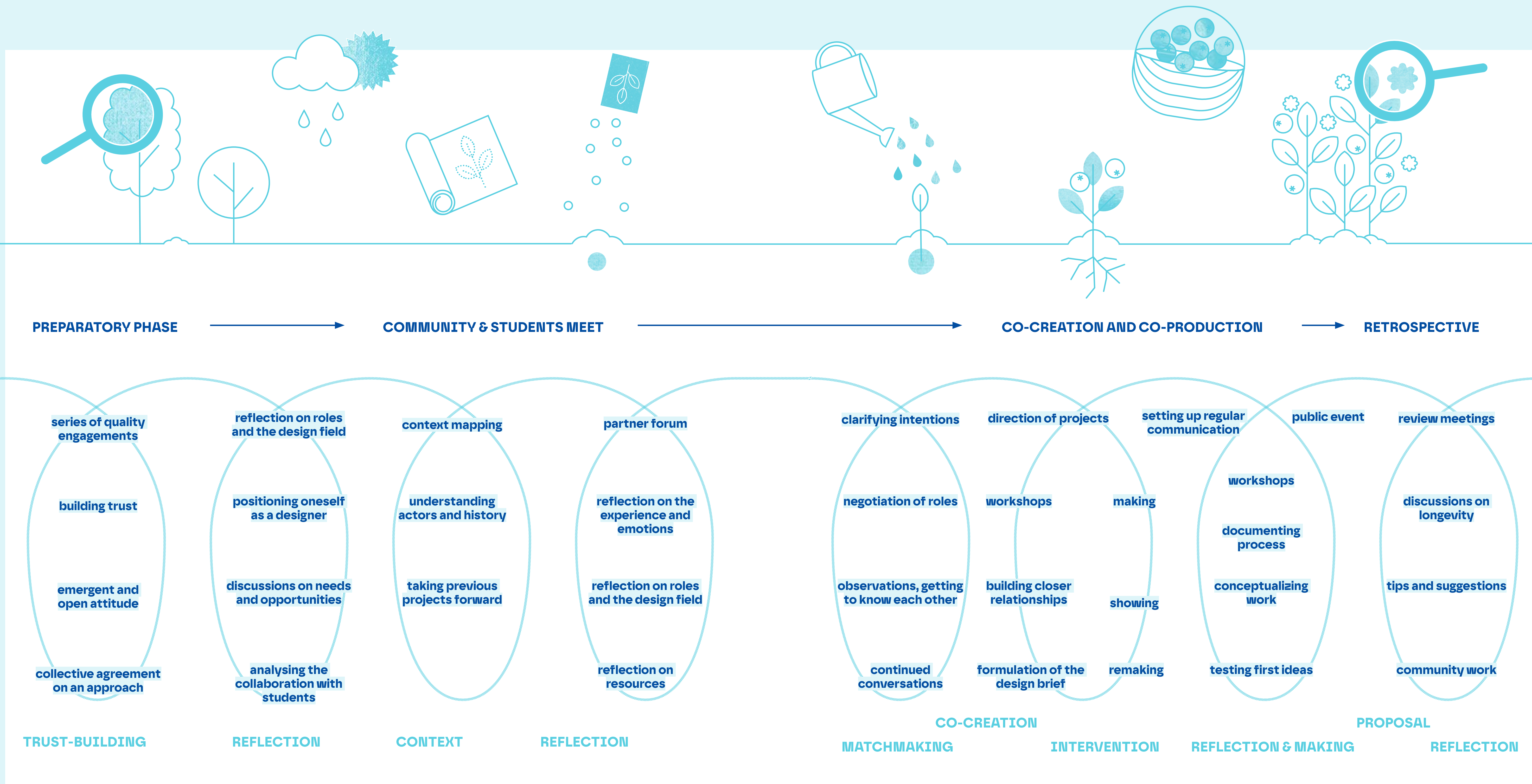
(6) Digitalise the co-created visual and share it with all relevant actors (one to two hours)

This visualization is based on a permaculture metaphor: creatively working with the skills and knowledge within a specific community while honouring available resources. On the surface, one can see the productive environment through gardening; while underneath, the roots represent the complex entanglement.

The engagement starts with building trust through thoughtful observation and respect towards the existing ecosystem. The collaboration continues by situating and positioning the research activities and mapping out the historical context and future aspirations. Next, the phase of active making and co-creating begins, empowering the community through activities such as participatory workshops and prototyping. Finally, the process involves more observations, looking back and ahead, and discussing maintenance and sustaining relationships.

Through this workshop, the facilitator representing academia can emphasise the aim of each stage and explain potential future steps to the community. For this purpose, specific examples are used, such as a case study on a successful community engagement project or, alternatively, a hypothetical scenario. During the workshop, the following possible aims can be highlighted (these were derived from the two pilots conducted by UdK and unibz):

CREATING A CULTURE OF RELATIONSHIPS



Preparatory phase: A crucial step for building relationships between academia and NGOs, and fostering collective agreement. This stage focuses on quality engagement (both formal and informal, for example, cooking together or sharing walks in the neighbourhood).

Situating stage: This stage involves community and students meeting on different occasions to build connections. Understanding historical contexts, reflecting on emotions and available resources, and negotiating roles — all these activities strengthen relationships between the community and students. This phase concludes with defining a direction for the project (for detailed recommendations concerning this stage, see *4.1. Recommendations for Situating a Project* on page 46).

Co-creation phase: Once closer relationships are established, the co-creation and co-production phase can commence. Students, as key contributors, and community members agree on a regular communication format to ensure that the community is not overburdened with requests and questions. Through active co-creation, making, and remaking, students and community members create a proposal while carefully documenting the creative process. This stage might also include a crucial aspect: communication with influential stakeholders such as the local government.

Sustaining phase: This stage involves communicating research findings back to the community through a public event, sparking discussions on future steps. The last stage includes retrospective workshops (for a detailed explanation, see the following sections) with all relevant stakeholders, emphasising the importance of sustaining the relationships.

Figure 17. The complexity behind community engagement

Pilot A followed the four stages (preparatory, situating, co-creating, and sustaining) visualised in Figure 18. These stages were derived from 1) a meticulous analysis of students' projects developed in the previous four years, and 2) semi-structured interviews with the main initiators of the long-standing collaboration. In the case of Pilot A, the timeline helped in two ways: on the one hand, by supporting the handing over of the collaborative process to a new course leader, and, on the other hand, by supporting the organisation of observations and reflections.

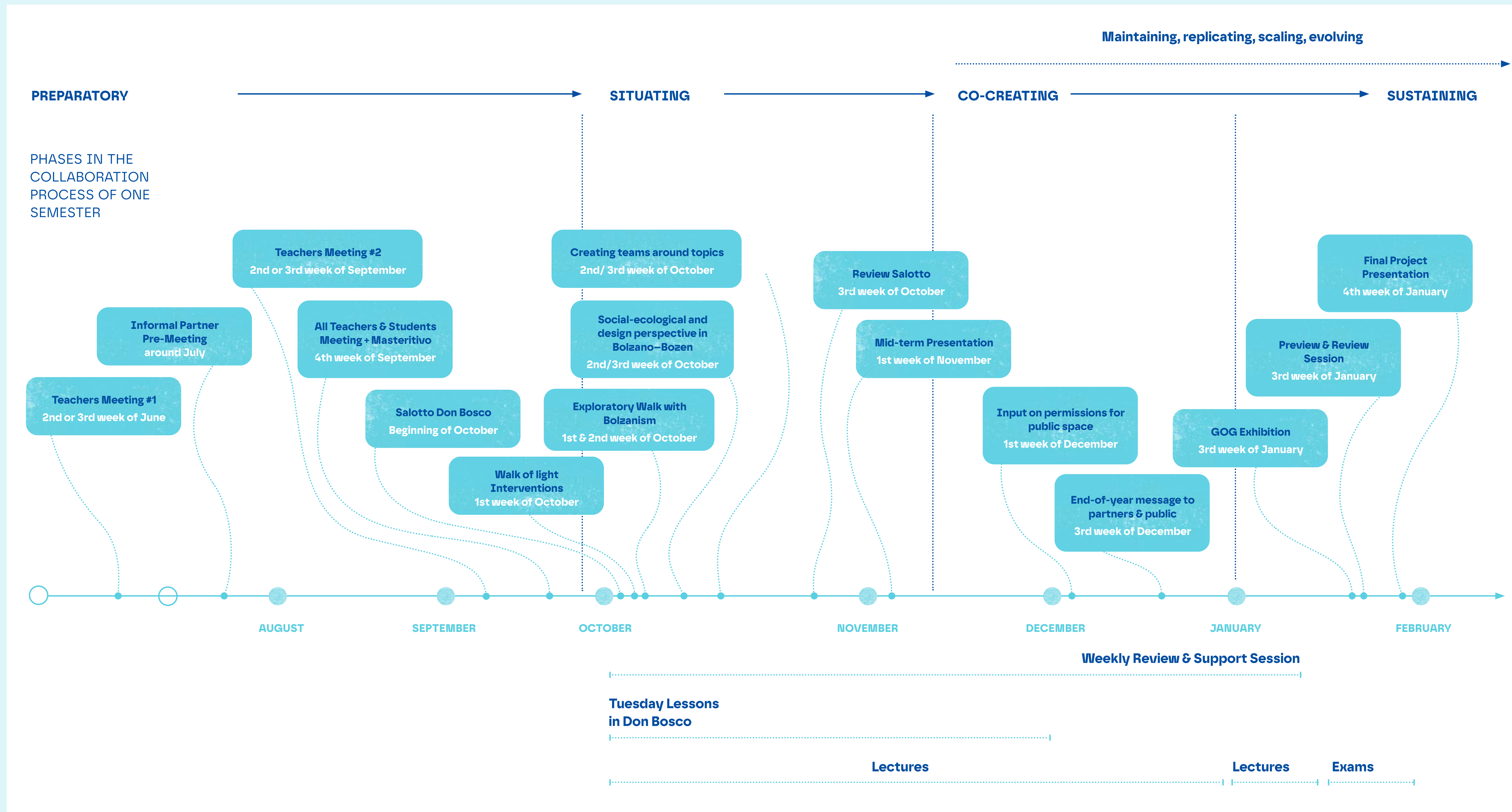


Figure 18. Four stages in Pilot A run by unibz

COLLECTIVE REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

5.5 'Reflection' Workshop

In addition to discussing community engagement, the interinstitutional collaboration might also benefit from documenting the learning process in-depth. This corresponds to the mutual learning phase within perspectives models (Bratteteig et al., 2012). In order to collect a wealth of insights, it might be beneficial to agree on the reflective research activities before community engagement begins. Making a research plan together with all stakeholders might help thinking through when and how to pause for reflection. In the pilots conducted by UdK and unibz, an internal and external investigation and monitoring process helped to identify main research findings and define the co-created value. Based on this process, a reflective workshop was co-created between all participating researchers. It is recommended to organise these kinds of reflection-focused workshops throughout the collaboration.

THE GOAL OF THE WORKSHOP:

This planning process aims to establish a structured approach that fosters effective collaboration and meaningful reflection, ensuring all stakeholders contribute to and benefit from the research process.

Participants: Researchers or course leaders and NGO representatives

Duration: Two hours for planning + one to two hours for digitalization

Tools needed: Post-it notes or small pieces of paper for writing the elements down, markers, and a large sheet of paper for placing the Post-it notes on.

Description of activities:

(1) Introduce yourself to the group (5 min)

(2) Create a research plan for the internal reflection process (30 min)

(3) Create a research plan for the external reflection process (30 min)

(4) Discuss the co-created plans (30 min)

(5) Reflect on learnings and takeaways as a group (25 min)

(6) Follow-up: Digitalise the co-created outcomes and share them with all relevant actors (one to two hours)

The process model below (Figure 19) exemplifies 1) internal reflective activities such as closing rounds, peer-to-peer interviews, semi-structured narrative interviews, observation sheets, recordings as a diary, and retrospective workshops, and 2) external reflective activities such as group interviews, observation, presentation, field visits to the NGO and the community, public events, and panel discussions. We suggest that internal reflection should be an ongoing process involving local researchers, students, and partners who are directly engaged in the cooperation, while external reflection should be led by other colleagues and researchers, and it should take place during the most active periods and milestone events of the project. After revising the monitoring results with all stakeholders, they can be digitised and collaboratively edited by the partners.

Peer-to-peer interviews were identified as one of the most constructive reflective activities in the pilots. Using a framework prepared by the researchers, students interviewed each other about their developing projects. They appreciated the format, as it allowed them to reflect together on their design process.

The following questions were proposed for student interviews:

(5) Who did you choose to collaborate with and why?

(6) What methods did you use to engage with these actors?

(7) What has facilitated your co-creation process so far (activities, infrastructures, actors)?

(8) What has worked well in the collaboration process so far?

(9) What challenges have you encountered and what strategies have you adopted to overcome them?

(10) How has your experience of co-creation been so far, and what are your expectations for the future?

(11) Additional question you formulated? (Students were given the option to add questions to the interview to delve into aspects of co-creation they cared about.)

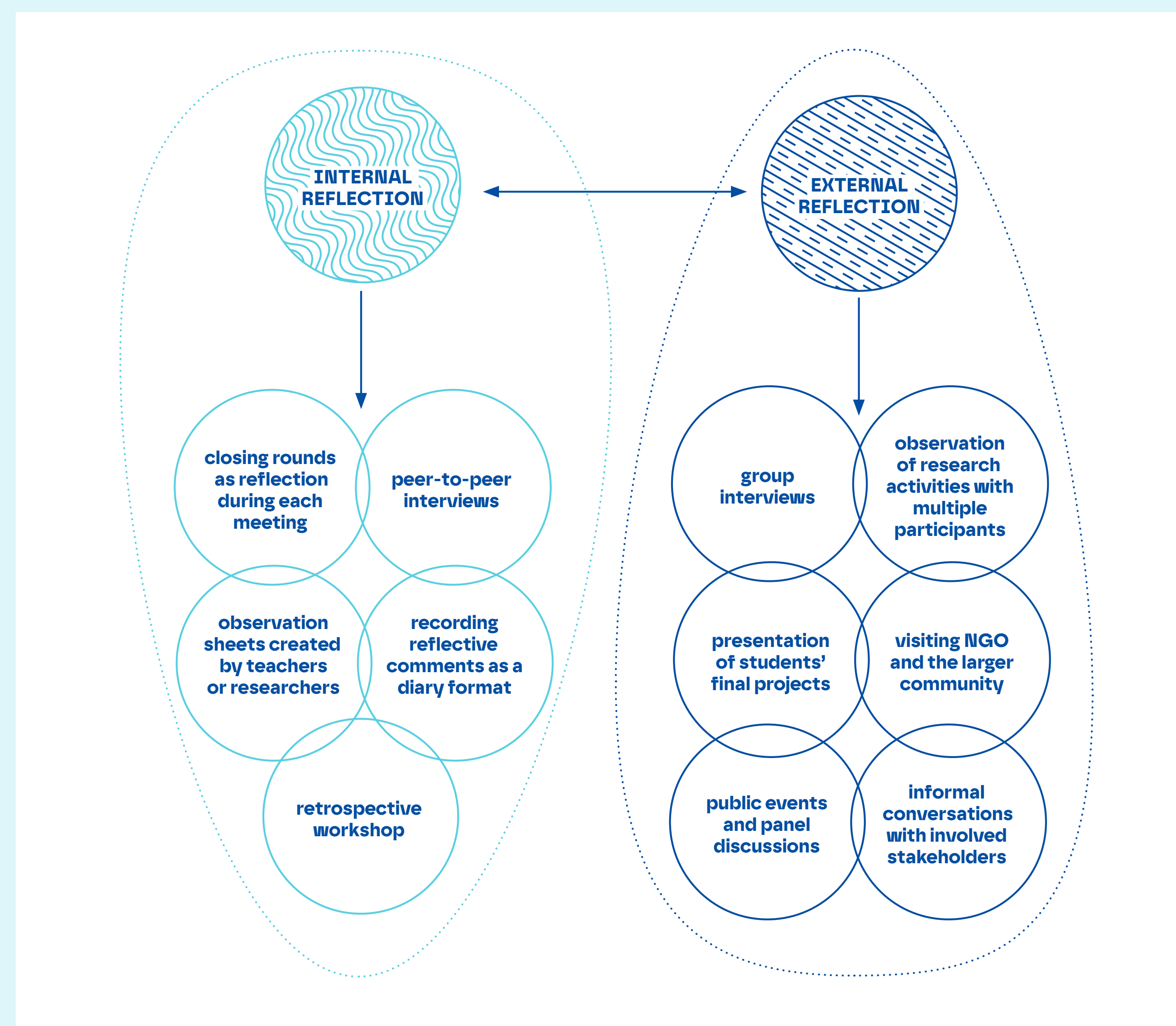


Figure 19. An overview of the research methods

5.6 'Looking Back and Moving Forward' Workshop

As briefly mentioned in the community engagement section, the last stage involves sustaining relationships through retrospective workshops. Organised with the involvement of all stakeholders (professors, students, the NGO, and community members), these workshops are designed to foster a mutual understanding of shared experiences. The structure of the workshop was tested with multiple actors, and it was inspired by the scripting approach of Huybrechts et al (Huybrechts et. al, 2018).

THE GOAL OF THE WORKSHOP:

The aim is to reflect on the collective process, analyse positive and challenging turning points, and explore possibilities for future collaboration. This debriefing session, while potentially the last activity in the collaboration, also serves as a preparatory phase to maintain relationships between academia and NGOs.

Participants: Professors, students, NGO representatives, and community members in separate sessions, with the facilitation of the course leader or researcher

Duration: A two-hour workshop for each group + one to two hours for digitalization

Description of activities:

(1) Introduce yourself to the group (5 min)

(2) Introduce the aims of the workshop and the timeline (10 min)

(3) Fill in the project timeline and, if needed, add stickers to the process (20 min)

(4) Collaboratively map the positive and challenging turning points (30 min)

(5) Discuss how to move forward and sustain relationships (30 min)

(6) Reflect on learnings and takeaways as a group (25 min)

(7) Follow-up: Digitalise the co-created process and share with all relevant actors (one to two hours)

In conducting the workshop, the following materials could aid the conversation:

- → An A0 size process chart with an overview of all the activities, the timeline, and a list of all student projects
- → Stickers for actors, activities, comments, ideas, and places to complete the existing drawings
- → Red and green dots for mapping positive and challenging turning points

The facilitator of this workshop should ensure that all participants contribute to the discussion and document their thoughts using the provided materials. If necessary, the facilitator can take a more active role in writing and using stickers.

- → The following guiding questions, similar to those used in Pilot A, are recommended for the workshop:
- → What could be sustained over time after the project ends?
- → What specific outcomes, methods, relationships, practices, arrangements, etc. could be continued or sustained? What would be necessary to maintain these aspects of the project, and what challenges might we face?

As a result of Pilot A, a timeline emerged, into which comments gathered through informal conversations with community actors were also integrated (Figure 20). This concluding process served as the basis for the revision of the semester course plan.

Figure 20. Workshop materials

5.7 'Principles for Impact and Value' Workshop

For sustainable collaborations, it is crucial to grasp the project's impact and value from diverse viewpoints. The insights gleaned from interviews and pilots underscore the necessary mindset for forging meaningful relationships and the assessment techniques employed. It is advisable for the academia and the NGO to mutually agree on the evaluation plan, either before or during the collaboration. Evaluative research activities, such as surveys, should be conducted around the same time as the retrospective workshop.

THE GOAL OF THE WORKSHOP:

This planning process aims to establish a structured approach that fosters effective collaboration and meaningful reflection, ensuring all stakeholders contribute to and benefit from the research process.

Participants: Researchers or course leaders and NGO representatives

Duration: 1.5 hours for conducting throughout the whole project + one to two hours for digitalization

Tools needed: Post-it notes or small pieces of paper for writing the elements down, markers, and a large sheet of paper for placing the Post-it notes on.

Description of activities:

(1) Introduce yourself to the group (5 min)

(2) Revise the list of suggestions (10 min)

(3) Discuss the applicable principles. (30 min)

(4) Create a value assessment plan (25 min)

(5) Reflect on learnings and takeaways as a group (20 min)

(6) Follow-up: Digitalise the co-created assessment plan and share it with all relevant actors (one to two hours)

Drawing on the literature review (such as the concept of learning outcomes described by Andrew Shea, 2012) and on the interviews conducted with global experts, the following list of suggestions was compiled to support evaluation conversations among multiple actors:

(1) Identify community strengths

(2) Engage with and utilise local resources

(3) Spend time together enjoying healthy food

(4) Coordinate and plan collaboratively, without directing

(5) Celebrate small victories and achievements

(6) Design with the community's voice

(7) Discuss learning outcomes with all actors involved

(8) Write actionable reports and publish them

(9) Conduct evaluation surveys or testimonials with actors

(10) Continue collaboration through thesis projects and community work

To assess the perceived value of interinstitutional collaborations, we suggest using an interactive poster, as was done in Pilot A, to collect feedback from participating actors (Figure 21).

Figure 21. An interactive poster used during pilot dissemination in unibz

Looking Ahead: The Future of Collaborative Social Design

The aim of this document was to support individuals — agents of change within design focused HEIs — who intend to collaborate with NGOs. The authors provided a comprehensive exploration of the collaboration between NGOs and social-design-focused academia, offering both critical analysis and practical guidance for fostering successful partnerships. As it was expressed in the introduction, the primary aim of this document was not to provide definitive solutions, but rather to offer new perspectives and approaches that can enhance already existing and newly formed collaborations.

Educators and researchers involved in this work plan to continue exploring the topic of interinstitutional collaborations beyond the scope of this book. To ensure quality and gather valuable insights, external experts were consulted to provide feedback on this document, with a particular focus on the workshop formats discussed in Chapter 5. Experts from Belgium, Argentina, the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, Germany, Italy, Hungary, and Brazil took part in focus group meetings, where the project team introduced the context of the project, the principles, and the workshop canvases to a diverse group of professionals. The experts provided valuable insight and feedback that was used for the further refinement of the Blueprint. The team considered these suggestions and each of these aspects was carefully checked and integrated in the relevant sections. They recommended providing more clarity regarding the workshop steps, and offered general suggestions on how to use them. They also highlighted the importance of introducing design principles sensitively to students and non-designer partners, as well as involving participants in regular self-reflection activities.

For further development, the authors highlight some of the key insights relevant to future exploration. One suggestion is to develop a shorter version tailored specifically to the needs of NGOs. Another focus could be to consider the inclusion of other stakeholders beyond NGOs, as social-design-focused academic collaborations with communities often involve a larger variety of groups that are not necessarily represented by NGOs.

Another potential focus area is the challenges and opportunities within the financial frameworks established around these projects, as different contexts require different resources that should be discussed and clarified. The distinction between undergraduate and graduate students could also be a subject of further research, given their differing levels of experience as well as the variability of project design related to the various needs and learning outcomes. It may be useful to introduce new tools for engaging students, ensuring their involvement remains meaningful. Insights from Pilot A could serve as a foundation for developing and reintroducing tools into future projects, although this may take more time. Expanding the scope in the future to include other academic disciplines, rather than focusing solely on social design, could also be beneficial, and it would be interesting to explore the differences and similarities between social-design-focused and non-social-design-focused academic-community collaborations. Incorporating learnings from failed processes or projects might offer valuable insights for future proposals. Finally, there is a need to address practical operational challenges, which are often overlooked in discussions but are vital to the success of collaborative efforts.

The community that created this volume of work gained an immense amount of experience that we hope readers will find useful. The ultimate aim was to share knowledge gathered within the community of participants of the Change Agents project and provide new perspectives for the current and future change makers of social design in higher education.

APPENDIX

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